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by BRANCH CARTER

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• RENEGADE GUNS AT MASSACRE BEND

by TOM ROAN

• MUSTANG TRAIL TO GLORY

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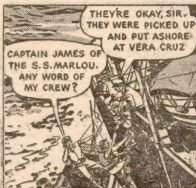
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FORWARD TO
IT, CAPTAIN



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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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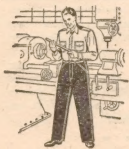
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POPULAR FILMS

Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans Ted Palmer Picks:

For Comedy-Romance: "The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend" with Betty Grable, Cesar Romero, Rudy Vallee and Olga San Juan (20th Century-Fox). Technicolor.



Beautiful, blonde, gun-happy Freddie Jones (Betty Grable) gets out of town fast after accidentally shooting the Honorable Judge Alfalfa O'Toole in the seat of his pants. Fleeing on a train, she is mistaken by the conductor for "little Hilda Swandumper from Bashful Bend" on her way to teach at Snake City. This is good enough for Freddie—only she knows nothing about school teaching. Charlie Hingelman (Rudy Vallee), under her charms, gives her a few lessons in teaching at night. Freddie's past, however, in the form of Blackie (Cesar Romero), catches up with her. Through a succession of hilarious events, the town is set afeudin', and Freddie gets taken back for trial. She almost goes free when Blackie offers to marry her, but Freddie finishes that by shooting at the judge again. Where and when? Why, in the end, of course. *Good spoofing with lots of broad laughs.*

For Adventure—"Illegal Entry" with Howard Duff, Marta Toren and George Brent (Universal).



To assist Immigration Inspector Dan Collins (George Brent) break up a gang that smuggles aliens across the Mexican border by plane, Burt Powers (Howard Duff) gets hired by the gang as a pilot. Lucky for him that Anna Duvak (Marta Toren)—an unwilling gang member—tips him off on a trap to test his loyalty. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to break the gang up and get the girl. *A semi-documentary with good, fast action.*

For Murder Mystery—"Manhandled" with Dorothy Lamour, Sterling Hayden, and Dan Duryea (Paramount).



A hard-pressed author, worried about a recurrent nightmare in which he kills his wife for her jewelry, visits a psychiatrist to get things off his chest. The psychiatrist's secretary, Merl Kramer (Dorothy Lamour), mentions this dream to Karl Benson (Dan Duryea), a private investigator, and a chain of events are set off which lead to murder of the wife, theft of the jewels and some of the dirtiest double-dealing you've seen in some time. Sterling Hayden is the insurance investigator who works on the case. *A film, well-played for suspense, with a neat, ironical wind-up.*

• • •

For Sports—"The Stratton Story" with James Stewart and June Allyson (MGM).



One of the pluckiest stories in sports is retold in this film version of the life of Monty Stratton—brilliant young Chicago White Sox pitcher who lost his leg in a hunting accident after the 1938 major league season. Overcoming this handicap, Stratton learned to use an artificial leg, and in 1946 pitching in the East Texas League, he won 18 games: Although Hollywood over-sentimentalizes the story, this remains a good baseball picture. Jimmy Stewart plays Stratton, June Allyson, his wife, while Gene Barden, Jimmy Dykes, Bill Dickey and Mervyn Shea lend authenticity to baseball sequences. *It makes a pleasant evening.*

• • •

For A Western—"The Younger Brothers" with Wayne Morris and Janis Page (Warners). Technicolor.



The four Younger brothers, who were once the "Dead End" kids of the West, along with Jesse James and his gang, find it's tough to go straight herein. A vindictive police officer, leading a misguided posse, and a beautiful, female outlaw leader both try to get the boys in trouble. Some good straight-shooting, hard riding and quick thinking save the day. *It has all you want in a Western.*

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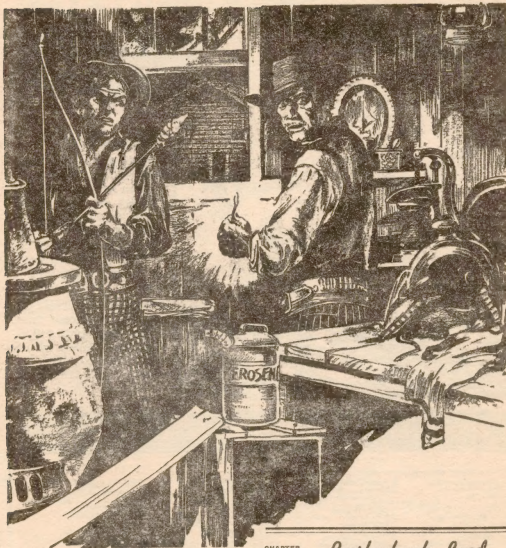
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**By BRANCH
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CHAPTER

Bushwhack Lead

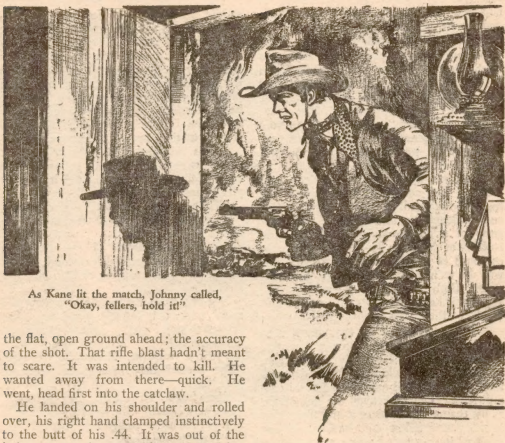
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Johnny Hardluck winced as the catclaw pierced his shirt and slashed across his unprotected face. He'd left the saddle that sudden.

Reflex and coordination. His mind grasped instantly how quickly the report had followed the bullet that had come from behind, ploughing through the crown of his sombrero, leaving a slight hurt with its passing.

These and other things hit him all at once—the thick brush close at his right;

JOHNNY HARDLUCK



As Kane lit the match, Johnny called,
"Okay, fellers, hold it!"

the flat, open ground ahead; the accuracy of the shot. That rifle blast hadn't meant to scare. It was intended to kill. He wanted away from there—quick. He went, head first into the catclaw.

He landed on his shoulder and rolled over, his right hand clamped instinctively to the butt of his .44. It was out of the holster now as he got to his knees, peering through his frail shelter.

Besides arousing his anger to the killing point, the shot puzzled him. He thought he had heard a yell. It sounded like "Wait!", but the rest was cut off by the report.

In his ears, growing louder, was the *ha-rump, ha-rump* of a running horse. It was coming fast. He saw the animal first, then the face of the man on it.

It was a hard face. There was the twist of a sneer on the lips; a look of triumph in the eyes, such as a man might have who had just downed a cougar or a coyote. He was stocky, with broad

shoulders. A rifle was half-shoved into its boot; a revolver was in his dangling right hand. He had downed his game and was coming in to finish it with the hand gun.

Johnny had the immediate idea he didn't like this man.

The horse was pulled down from his run to slower speed. When it was fifteen yards away, Johnny stepped clear of the bush, his right hand and his gun concealed behind his chaps. There was no hesitation on the man's part. His gun raised swiftly.

★ Johnny bit off a job to spook a two-gun Galahad—
when he named himself the Lazy B's ramrod, nurse and
protector against the ruthless power of the Walking K. ★

Johnny's slug caught him where it was intended to, high in the right side. It smashed him from the saddle and he thudded to the ground. The cayuse swerved past Johnny and went on.

Johnny stepped swiftly forward, eyes alert, noting that the weapon had fallen a few feet from the man's hand, seeing the spreading stain of crimson on the open shirt and hairy chest. Movement beyond the man caught his attention. Another horseman was there, about fifty yards away, walking his horse toward them.

This was a younger man, lean and slender. The sombrero was new and set high on the head. Below it, his face was sun-reddened but lacking the deep mahogany of a plainsman. He was looking steadily at the scene before him. The only evidence of a weapon Johnny could see was in a holster strapped to the thin waist. Both hands held the reins.

Johnny holstered his own weapon and waved to the fellow to come on.

He kept his eyes on the young man while he himself picked up the wounded man's fallen gun. He broke the weapon, saw the cylinder held forty fours, dropped them into his hand and shoved them into a pocket. Then he heaved the gun as far as his throw would carry it and looked up at the young fellow who had halted just short of the wounded man.

"He tried to shoot you, didn't he?"

Johnny gave a short, brittle laugh.

"I'll say he made a damned good try."

Johnny half-backed to his fallen sombrero, picked it up and came back with his finger punched in the bullet hole. He held it up for examination and looked hard at the young face above him. "Do you know why?"

"No, I don't."

Johnny liked that straight answer. He liked the lack of belligerency on the young fellow's part, and he particularly liked the steady look he was getting from the cool blue eyes.

"That seems to be putting us on the same side of fence, so far," he said.

The stocky man was groaning, moving his head from side to side. He had a hand clamped to his wound, and red streaked between his fingers. He was flat on his back and made no move to raise himself.

"Somebody help me," he said huskily.

The young fellow remained in the saddle, still looking at Johnny.

Then a third rider appeared and bore down toward them. This one was a girl.

She wore a wide hat on rich brown hair. Her cheeks also were reddened from the sun and sand glare, and her eyes were blue and oddly like those of the man who had preceded her. She was very pretty and lithe in the saddle. She drew up, staring at the man on the ground.

"Zeke has been shot," she cried. Her glance swept angrily from Johnny to the young fellow. "That man did it. Aren't you going to do something?"

"Take it easy, Judith," the man said. "There is something here we don't understand."

"Don't understand? I can see Zeke lying there bleeding to death and neither one of you doing a thing to help him. All right, then I will."

She slid from the saddle, dropping the reins over her horse's head. As she started to step forward, Johnny interposed his body.

"Just a moment, Miss," he drawled. "I've earned the right to take charge here."

She faced him with blazing eyes. "You're a beast." She tried to move past him but his arm checked her.

"Your Zeke must've thought I was some kind of beast too," he told her, and let her see the punctured crown. She looked away from it, and up at the young fellow.

"Aren't you going to do anything, Dan?"

"Judith," Dan said a little sharply, "the best thing you can do is to get back to the ranch and send one of the hands with the buckboard."

"And leave you here with this murderer?"

"I am beginning to suspect," Dan said dryly, "that you are a little confused over which one is the murderer. If you want to be of any help, get going, Sis."

She left reluctantly, after a spiteful glance for Johnny's benefit. He shook his head wonderingly after her.

"Sure has gumption. Ain't a mite afraid of sassing a man with a gun on his hip."

"She's new to this country," Dan said.

"So am I." His tone wasn't friendly; neither was it unfriendly. Johnny knew he was being sized up, and he liked that. This young fellow wasn't afraid either.

Johnny turned to Zeke, stood over him and slowly built a smoke. Ignoring the man's groans, he offered paper and tobacco to Dan. Leisurely, he knelt beside Zeke, drew aside his shirt and looked at the wound.

The blood was oozing steadily but there were no bubbles in it, a sign that the lungs had escaped injury. Without rising, Johnny looked up at Dan and shook his head soberly.

"Pretty bad," he said. "I'd give him 'bout an hour, less something was done for him."

HE STOOD up, gave a long drag on his cigarette and flicked the ash carelessly. Zeke was gazing up at him with startled eyes.

"You ain't goin' to do nothin'?" he wailed. "You goin' to leave me here to die?" He twisted his head toward Dan. "Won't you do somethin' for me, Mr. Blair? I'm your foreman, ain't I?"

"This man seems to be top gun now," Dan said.

Zeke turned his eyes back to Johnny. "For gosh sake, ain't you human?"

"A cougar jumped me once," Johnny said. "I was lucky to bust his shoulder. I got a heap more respect for a cougar than I have for a bushwhacker. I put the cougar outta his misery." He glanced up at Dan. "How long you reckon 'fore Judith can get to the ranch and have a team back here?"

"If she's lucky enough to find someone around, a little short of an hour. If it has to be old Ramirez, it will take longer."

Zeke groaned. "Mr. Blair, don't let that damn Ramirez come near me while I'm down!"

"Mebbe," Johnny drawled, "if you want to tell us something, we could plug you up and keep you goin' a little longer. Why did you set out to kill me?"

"Took you for a brander."

"That's a lie. You musta cut my trail and seen I was going steady across whatever range this might be."

"It ain't a lie," Zeke said desperately.

"How come?"

"I come across a brandin' fire, 'fore you seen me, Mr. Blair. This fellow was comin' from that direction, and one of our cows had been downed. I thought I'd scared him off."

"S'pose," Johnny said coolly, "you tell Blair just where that fire is."

Zeke told of a low ridge and a coulee beyond it, and Dan nodded his head.

Johnny turned. His big bay had halted a short distance away and was looking back with working nostrils and his ears pointed. Johnny whistled shrilly and the horse started trotting toward them. Zeke's cayuse had also stopped and was vainly reaching sideways against the reins to crop the scant grass. It followed the bay.

Johnny took two clean handkerchiefs from his saddlebag and a small bottle nearly full of whiskey. He opened Zeke's shirt, soaked one of the handkerchiefs and wiped away the blood from the wound. The second handkerchief he left folded. He soaked whiskey on it and laid it on the bullet hole.

Dan Blair had dismounted by that time and knelt beside him to help. Johnny took off Zeke's bandanna, accepted the one Dan handed him and bound the bandage in place as securely as possible. He then held the bottle to Zeke's lips and let him take a long swallow. He returned the bottle to the saddlebag, picked up Zeke's sombrero and tilted it over the man's eyes as a shelter from the sun which had climbed close to the zenith.

Johnny stepped a few paces away, rolling another cigarette, and Dan joined him.

"Didn't you want to ask him anything more?" Dan said.

"Signs don't lie," Johnny said tersely. "Men sometimes do."

Dan frowned. "I guess I don't understand the men out here. Did you make anything out of what he told you?"

Johnny looked at him squarely.

"Look," he said. "We both want to know some things. You're being polite about it, and kinder wise too, but you want to know where I fit in here. A little back-trailin' will tell you. When a feller I never saw before goes to bushwhackin' me, I hone to know all there's in it. Mebbe if there is a fire, that'll tell us something. If you've a mind to, you can tell me more."

The bay had followed Johnny and nuzzled against his shoulder. Johnny rubbed the sleek neck. Dan, who had been frowning over Johnny's last remark, smiled a little at the sight.

"Animals," he said, "are wiser than most men. They know their real friends." "One thing you can tell me now," Johnny said. "Why is Zeke there afraid of a Mexican, Ramirez?"

"Ramirez is an old man. He comes with the place. A clause in the deed makes it his home as long as he lives. He has a daughter, a very pretty girl about eighteen. Ramirez told Zeke if he bothered her, he would find a knife between his ribs. Nothing to it."

A little later, when Johnny was silent, he spoke again.

"You mustn't blame my sister. I might have got ideas if I hadn't been here to see it happen. I yelled to Zeke not to shoot when I saw his rifle up."

"Yeah, I heard you. One reason I put up my gun when you came along."

"How could you hear me? It was right in the middle of his shot."

"Mister, when you go travelin' through a country where there's sidewinders like Zeke yonder, you get to noticin' things."

With the buckboard came a man of about forty as driver. He was a lean, whang-leather sort of fellow, with long mustaches, black eyes and an unusual nervousness of manner. He was chewing tobacco. As he wheeled the team into place beside Zeke, he spat not far from Johnny's feet and at the same time gave him a hard, stabbing look.

Judith and a second puncher were along as outriders. Both dismounted and came forward, the girl going at once to Zeke's side while the cowboy hung back a little.

"Well, I'm glad to see," Judith said sarcastically, "that you did something after all, Dan."

"You're mistaken, Judy," Dan said quietly. "I didn't do a thing."

Judith shifted her glance to Johnny, but he was looking curiously at the other puncher; a blond-haired fellow in his early twenties, scarcely older than Johnny himself. What stirred Johnny's curiosity was that, instead of scowling like the driver, he seemed to have difficulty in sup-

pressing a grin. As he stepped close to help lift the wounded man, a smile broke out on his lips.

"Shad," Dan Blair directed the driver, "you stay where you are. The three of us will help Zeke in. Easy on his shoulder, Jim," he cautioned the young cowboy.

Blankets and a heavy quilt had been spread on the floor of the buckboard, and they eased Zeke on to these. Johnny did not miss the look Jim gave the wounded man and the latter's neglect to avoid his glance.

The four stood watching as the team started off.

"Dan," Judith spoke quickly. "Don't you think Jim should go along with them, in case something happened?"

"Reckon I got to git back pronto," the cowboy drawled. "I'd just rid in to get me a pick when Miss Judith called me. One of the springs needs clearin'."

"If you're going to the ranch," Dan said, "take Zeke's horse along."

"Wait a minute, Jim." Johnny stepped to Zeke's cayuse and yanked out the rifle that was protruding halfway from the boot. He levered out the cartridges, then turned to Dan Blair.

"This gun yours?"

"No, Zeke's."

Johnny glanced around until he saw a small boulder. He stepped to it, smashed stock from barrel and tossed what was left in the general direction he'd thrown the sixgun.

The young cowboy laughed. Judith watched with a puzzled expression.

"I don't understand a thing about this," she said. "And I don't like it. I'll go back with you, Jim. How about you, Dan?"

"We'll be in later."

"We?" She raised her brows, and with her flushed face and deep blue eyes, Johnny couldn't deny that she made as pretty a picture as he'd seen for a long while.

"Yes," Dan smiled slightly. "And we'll be awful hungry."

Johnny had rolled a cigarette. As Jim mounted and started off with Zeke's horse, Johnny followed a few paces, head bent as if in thought. Actually he wanted to see the imprint of the spare cayuse's four shod feet. Satisfied, he was about to turn back, when he noticed a peculiarity in a

hoofmark of Jim's mount; a nail bent in the shoeing.

MOUNTING, they followed the trail until it branched, one fork coming from straight ahead and the other joining it at a diagonal from the left. Johnny indicated the first.

"Reckon you can see where I come from," he told Dan.

Dan Blair nodded.

"So Zeke came in from there."

They rode on, along Zeke's back trail, on ground that sloped upward to the mesa above them, with the hoof marks running near the edge of a dip to the chaparral growth on their right. Suddenly Johnny stopped the bay and slid from the saddle. He had met still another set of hoofprints; dug up earth showed a running horse pulled to an abrupt turn to take off toward the chaparral. Bent low, he followed these a short distance, straightened and came back.

Dan said, "Say, mind telling me what to call you?"

"Most folks call me Johnny. Then they tacked something else after it."

"What is that?"

"Hardluck."

"It seems to me that Zeke had the hard luck."

"Sure, that's the way it goes . . . Zeke wouldn't tell us, but he thought he knew who he was shootin' at. It wasn't me. More'n that, you got what a feller calls a house divided. I'd say you and Miss Judith ain't sittin' pretty right now."

Dan laughed. "And you get all that from a set of horse tracks?"

"From horse tracks with a bent shoe nail, a grin and a scowl, and a hole in my hat. Let's get on to that coulee. This is gettin' plumb interesting."

They topped the rim of the mesa and a cooler breeze blew in their faces. Dan rode with a thoughtful frown.

"What else do you know?" he asked shortly.

Johnny ignored the question. "How long you been here, Blair?"

"Almost three months. I have a ninety-day option from a St. Louis bank, and until this morning I had decided to take it up. In fact I have arranged for a thousand more head. There's good water and

they told me this range would graze four times what I have. A tally shows about eight hundred to go with the property."

Johnny pointed to the left. "That's where you and Miss Judith come from?"

"Yes, we had just cleared that clump of scrub and saw Zeke running his horse hard. He didn't hear me call and I took out after him."

"Better tell me 'bout your crew," Johnny suggested.

"When we came there were Ramirez, his daughter and two oldsters, Hank Bowers and Hiram Wunce. Hank brought his nephew, Jim Larkin. Then a kind neighbor sent me Zeke Turner and he brought Shad Gilly and Toni Land."

Johnny pressed spurs lightly and they rode at a faster pace. Soon the mesa dipped gradually to a broad, lush valley. On the farther slope Johnny saw some cottonwoods, and between them a collection of ranch buildings. Ahead he caught the sunlight glint on a patch of water. The whole scene gave the wanderer a touch of nostalgia. Here the cattle were more numerous. Some carried A H combined, but the greater number bore a Walking K.

"Your kind neighbor wouldn't have a name beginning with K, would he?" Johnny drawled.

"Why yes. That would be Charley Knapp." He pointed toward a low ridge at their right. "Over there is the coulee," he said.

"What's the A H brand?" Johnny asked.

"The old mark. Mine is what Hank calls Lazy B. See those over there?"

Johnny grunted something that sounded more like an oath than an affirmative. He scented something and evidently he didn't like the odor. They came over the rise and Dan pointed again, but Johnny was looking far ahead where dotlike figures of three horsemen were coming in their direction.

"Those your fellers?" he asked casually.

"Can't be. Bowers and Wunce were going to the south graze and Toni Land is off somewhere else. Must be some of Knapp's men. His range is up that way."

"Then s'pose we get there first."

The coulee, which was little more than a shallow arroyo, ran to a level space in the center. There Johnny saw a small

collection of blackened embers and beside it a running iron.

"Stay on your horse," he told Dan, and moved the bay over where a half dozen cattle were scattered. He settled on one that had a fresh Lazy B over an older Walking K. He came back to Dan and his face was grim.

"Reckon we scared Zeke more'n we knew, or he'd never sent us here." He cursed once. "Mister, they got you in an awful tight. Want me to handle this? They'll be here in a minute."

"I haven't the slightest idea what it's all about. But I believe I can trust you, Johnny. That's Charley Knapp, so there won't be any trouble."

"Can you handle that thing on your hip?" Johnny asked sharply.

"Is it as bad as that?"

"It can be a damned sight worse. You stick to your saddle and keep behind me. Don't get jumpy and don't go to sleep."

CHAPTER

Wet-Brander Johnny

2

The riders were less than a hundred yards away now. Johnny got leisurely from the saddle, hitching up his gun belt as his feet struck the ground. He stepped to the dead fire and stooping, placed a hand on a rock in it that had a little more warmth in it than could be credited to the sun. Turning, he stood a moment, looking around, then picked up the iron and held it so he could see the brand. Then he walked deliberately toward the blaze steer, all in sight of the horsemen.

He heard Dan call, "Hello, Charley," and Knapp's, "Howdy, Blair," and turned back toward them. They drew in abreast and a little apart. Johnny saw Knapp was a stocky man with keen black eyes.

"You got any ideas 'bout this, Knapp?" he asked abruptly. "Looks to me like some damn fool tryin' to make trouble between good neighbors."

"What the hell you got there, and who are you?" Knapp asked harshly.

Johnny gave a half glance toward Dan Blair.

"A new man," Dan said evenly. "Just got in a half hour ago."

"Well, what is it?" Knapp asked again.

"Something a blind man could figger out," Johnny told him calmly. "That Lazy B don't half cover the Walkin' K. You can see for yourself."

Johnny had sized up the two men on either side of their boss and decided that the one to the left was the man to watch. He was a surly-faced fellow with a hard, bold look. And he was the one who spoke into it now, pointing with his left hand.

"Look, Charley. You can see it plain. Wet brandin', like we heard. By hell, you got 'em dead to rights, and I reckon this new feller's the critter that did it."

Johnny tossed the iron ahead so that it clattered at the feet of the man's horse, causing it and the rider a moment of confusion.

"Seem' I can prove you're a damn liar," Johnny said, "you got anything to back it up?"

"I'll say I have," the man yelled.

His pistol was out of the holster but Johnny's bullet smashed his hand and knocked the gun to the ground. Following the report, Johnny heard a voice speak quietly.

"I'd hate to shoot, Knapp, but I wouldn't act too hastily in this if I were you." It was Dan Blair.

Johnny's gun was on the second rider. He saw the two of them shove their weapons back and put their hands on the saddlehorns. A half backward glance showed Dan's pistol in the hand that rested on his thigh. Johnny holstered his own. Knapp's face was contorted with rage. Ignoring his cursing henchman, who was holding his bleeding hand, he turned on Dan Blair.

"I ain't sayin' you're in this personal, Blair, but the count is all against you, and you're responsible. Mebbe you're new round here, but that there thing"—he pointed—"calls fer a hangin'. If you know what's safe for you, you'll kite back pronto where you come from."

"I don't scare that easy, Knapp," Dan Blair said steadily. "Besides I am more interested than you to find out what all this means."

"We'll find out, all right," Knapp growled. "And somebody's goin' to stretch cottonwood." He glared at Johnny, who laughed at him. Knapp turned

to the man at his right. "Ed, you cut into town and bring Sheriff Adler out here pronto."

"And, Ed," Johnny called, "while you 'bout it, you could tell Tom Adler that Johnny Hardluck will be along, mebbe tomorrow, with the stuff Sheriff Baxton in Gilead'lows he oughter have."

Knapp's red face went through a series of odd changes of expression. He glanced to his left at the injured rider, then back to Ed.

"Fore you git to town," he said, "better take Jake home and fix him up. Then if he needs it, you can ride him to Doc." He gathered the reins in his hands.

"And, Knapp," Johnny said, "while we're talkin' nice and friendly-like, I oughter to tell you that we're bringing in a thousand head, so better get your critters off our range 'fore they get mixed up."

Knapp opened and closed his mouth several times, and Johnny laughed at him again.

"Another thing, Knapp," he said. "Smokepoles ain't no good when it comes to cutting. Tom Adler wouldn't like it if your boys brung them and we wouldn't neither."

"Damn you!" Knapp roared. Then the cold expression of Johnny's eyes stopped him. He controlled his rage with an effort; his look grew crafty and, in Johnny's judgment, far more dangerous. He addressed himself to Dan Blair.

"I'll try to be fair," he said. "If you wasn't new here, Blair, seein' a thing like that, I'd come with guns smokin'."

"Now don't let that hold you back," Johnny taunted.

This time, Knapp didn't even look at him.

"I'll see th' sheriff," Knapp went on as if he hadn't heard. "Reckon he'll get up a posse and we'll push this through 'cordin' to law. Bein' a neighbor I'd oughter warn you the best you can expect is to be allowed to clear out in one piece."

He emphasized the threat with a deep scowl, then raised his head.

"How come your foreman, Zeke Turner, ain't here 'stead o' this ranny?"

"Zeke's got business in town," Johnny cut in. "Did I hear you call him Blair's foreman?"

"You did. What about it?"

"I got different ideas. Might surprise you, Knapp, to know Zeke himself told us we better have a look up here." He saw the shaft strike home and pushed it further. "Zeke got right bad hurt, back yonder, and he said things mebbe he'd better kept to hisself. Leastwise I'm foreman now. You can talk to me if you want."

"I don't want a damn thing from you!" Knapp roared. "Come on, boys; we'll get on back. Pick up Jake's gun, Ed."

"Allow me," Johnny said elaborately. "Git your hoss's feet off it, Jake."

He walked forward, stooped and picked up the weapon, all the time with his eyes raised to Jake without losing sight of the other two. He broke the gun, dumped the shells on the ground.

"You know damn well, Jake, you're lucky. That could a been plumb between the eyes just as easy."

He tossed the empty revolver to Ed and watched as the three wheeled and put their mounts to a run.

JOHNNY set a fast pace on their way to the ranchhouse and Dan noticed it. "You must be hungry, Johnny," he said with a laugh.

"Yeah; I'd kinder like to swallow some food."

"I thought we got out of that nicely. At one time I expected to see us all shooting."

"Mister," Johnny growled, "we ain't out of it. We're plum' in it up to our ears."

They turned their mounts into the corral and Dan went on to the low main building. While comfortable in appearance, it looked much in need of repair. Johnny snaked a towel from his saddlebag and washed face and hands in the little stream that trickled from a wooden pipe into a trough. He expected to eat with the boys but Dan called to him from the porch.

At the threshold Judith Blair greeted him with both hands extended and a very warm smile.

"From what Dan has just told me," she said, "I owe you an apology."

She did not relinquish his hands immediately. Johnny Hardluck was very

much embarrassed under their warm pressure.

"Aw, shucks, ma'am," he muttered. "You showed nothing but grit and a big heart. Don't see how anyone can blame you for that."

She laughed, gave a final squeeze and a long look into his eyes.

"Now that," she said, "makes everything fine, and I am glad. I understand we will see much of each other. Oh, yes." She turned. "This is Lolita—Lolita Ramirez, who probably has more right to be here than I."

Johnny had been so confused by Judith that he hadn't even noticed the other girl. Now he could scarcely take his eyes from her. She looked about eighteen, tall, slender, but not too slender. Her clear skin was faintly olive; her eyes were dark and brilliant under a good forehead and raven hair. She came toward him, and he didn't miss the liteness of her supple body. She grasped his arm with both her hands and looked up at him with an expression in her limpid eyes that stirred him strangely.

She said, "*Mille gracias*—a thousand thanks for taking away that Zeke who trouble me so much. I could kees you for that." She turned her head a little sideways. "Maybe some day I weel."

Lolita, Johnny thought, could very well take care of herself. If anyone was in danger here, it was Johnny Hardluck.

"Dinner is waiting," Judith Blair cut in. Her tone wasn't quite so warm as it had been before.

Johnny had been in a hurry to get to the ranchhouse and he was in a hurry to finish the meal, one of the most tasteful he'd been treated to in many a month. Judith noticed it and made a laughing comment.

"Dan and me," he told her, "have to get into town right pronto." And when he saw the concern in her eyes he turned to Lolita. "Have to see how Zeke is making out. Want me to give him your regards, Lolita?"

"No, thank you, Señor Juanito. But, yes. I let you have my *knife* for heem, if you give it to heem good."

He drank the last of his coffee, murmured his thanks to both girls, and stood up. Dan Blair followed him out. But if

Johnny's plan was unexpected, he asked no questions.

"Wish you'd pick the two best critters you got," Johnny told him. When they were in the saddle he found nothing to complain about them.

They rode in silence for some distance, and then Dan could restrain his curiosity no longer.

"I'll take you up on that foreman proposition," he began. "And I'll pay you—" Johnny waved a hand impatiently.

"Never mind about that. I'll take it till we're shet of this tight or until we get our necks stretched, and thataway money ain't no good."

Dan thought this over for another mile. "I don't suppose diplomacy was in order," he said, "but I couldn't understand why you kept goading Knapp."

"Mister," Johnny told him, "I was doing my damndest to make Charley Knapp draw his iron. Thataway we'd got this fixed permanent." He went on to explain, "Knapp rigged this, along with Zeke Tanner, to drive you off the range. We can't prove that—yet. But right now they got their hookers in us plenty."

Dan didn't ask any more questions. They hit the dusty main street of the town in silence, and pulled their mounts to a walk. Johnny's alert look was everywhere. As they passed what was probably the largest saloon in the place, he checked suddenly and swung in to the rack beside the low building. He'd seen the running K on two nags there.

"Dan," Johnny said, "s'pose you mosey over to the doc's and find out 'bout Zeke. See you at the sheriff's in a little."

Without waiting, he stepped to one side of the open saloon door. He closed his eyes briefly, to get the sun glare from them, then slid in quietly and moved away from the doorway to his left.

He saw more men than should have been expected at this hour of the day, a half dozen or so, and all were crowded at the long bar. Their voices were loud and angry. They appeared so interested in what they were wrangling over that none noticed the new arrival.

He scanned them hurriedly, looking for the brutal face of the Walking K boss. He wasn't there. Johnny was wondering whether he could steal out unnoticed when

the men shifted a little to permit him to see a lean man, with long mustaches, who was doing the loudest talking. It was Shad Gilly, the driver who had brought the injured Zeke to the doctor and who should have been back on the Lazy B long since.

Shad was very drunk and belligerent. He was cursing someone without a name who had bushwhacked his foreman, and he was yelling aloud of wet-branding on the Lazy B. Johnny eased his belt a little, loosened the gun stuck hard in its holster.

The bartender, who had been listening to the talk with bored look and skeptical eyes, saw Johnny and moved down toward him.

"What'll it be, Mister?"

THE half dozen all turned, separating a little, staring at Johnny. Shad was having difficulty focusing his eyes. Johnny recognized the second puncher who had been at the coulee with Knapp. At the same time, Ed remembered him and shoved the man next to him away for elbow room, while a third man pushed through from the other side to stand beside Ed. The others gave back a little, gawking but curious.

Johnny was ready when Shad suddenly got his eyes clear and yelled: "There's the dad-blasted jasper I was tellin' you 'bout. Git him, fellers!"

Ed and his companion drew swiftly. Johnny pulled down on Ed, seeing even as he shot that the second man's gun was coming on him and that he would be too late to get both. As he pressed the trigger, he ducked sidewise and saw the flame of the puncher's gun. Its report mingled with a blast from the open doorway.

Johnny did not feel the expected shock of lead. Clearing the little smoke cloud from his own discharge, he saw both punchers falling and Shad with his gun clear. He chose the lean driver's right shoulder and he didn't miss. Shad fell down howling. Keeping his gun on the rest of the scattered crowd, Johnny glanced swiftly to his right.

"Get away from that doorway, Dan," he called, then gave his attention to the other men.

"If any you fellers want in this," he told them, "now's your chance. I don't know a danged one of you but I do know

that somebody's been doing a heap of lying right here and tried to cover it up."

No one answered him, but he could see they were muttering among themselves. The looks they gave him could never be mistaken for friendliness. Without doubt Shad and Ed had told their stories—the shooting of Zeke; the wounding of Knapp's man, Jake; the wet branding in the coulee. And before their eyes three more men had been downed.

Obviously they didn't want any of that accurate lead for themselves. But here were all the grounds for a lynching and there is a thing known as mob courage. Johnny didn't like it at all.

"Put up your guns," a hard voice called from the doorway, and a shadow blocked the streaming sunlight.

Johnny didn't comply until he had seen no hostile move from the men before him and taken a look at the big man coming in. He wore a star on his bulging chest, and his keen eyes took in the situation at a glance. He turned to Johnny.

"Wal, now," he said. "You're the only feller I see with a gun out."

"When you get your eyes used to the light, Sheriff," Johnny drawled, "reckon you can see three more lyin' over yonder."

"What I see I don't like by a danged sight. Who started it? You, huh?"

"If you don't want to take my word for it," Johnny said, "ask the bartender."

The bartender waved a hand toward where Shad was groveling and cursing against his pain.

"All I knows is that there feller doin' all the yawpin' yelled, 'Git him, fellers,' and then it seemed to me 'bout six guns went off to once."

"Humph," was the sheriff's comment. Then he called to one of the onlookers: "Bemis, go fetch the doc." He remained where he was standing, a huge man but not gone to fat, with a great head, graying hair and cold, piercing eyes.

As Bemis reached the door, another figure pushed in. Charley Knapp was there. His dark face twisted with anger when he saw the two silent figures by the bar.

"Dammit, Adler," he raged. "This has gone too far." He saw Johnny. "There's your killer and I'm goin' to see him hanged."

"Hold your shirt on, Charley," the big sheriff told him. "This feller's goin' to the jail with me right soon and we'll see what we make of it."

"That don't satisfy me," Knapp roared. "That's three of my men he's shot so far!"

"Reckon you mean four, don't you, Knapp?" Johnny put in.

"And he's got to be stopped 'fore he kills any more. If the law won't do what they oughter, I've got fellers that will. Every rancher—"

"I told you to take it easy, Charley," the sheriff interrupted him. His tone was quiet but there was the hardness of steel in it. "That other matter you spoke about needs lookin' into. 'Bout this ruckus, I have Sam's word that Shad was the cuss that set off the fireworks. You tend to gettin' your two men outa here and I'll look after Shad an' this feller."

Dan Blair came over to the big sheriff.

"Perhaps I should go to the jail too," he said. "I shot one of those men."

A light gleamed in the sheriff's eyes.

"Wal, now, ain't that something. A feller comin' right out and sayin' he's kilt somebody. Why'd you do it?"

"I saw those three men all trying to shoot my foreman and I fired."

"Now wait a minnit. You're Blair, ain't you? Taking over the old Al Hudson place? Thought Zeke Tanner was your foreman."

"He is," Knapp said before Dan could reply. "That feller's the one who done the wet brandin' I told you about."

"Sheriff," Johnny spoke into it. "Wish you'd take a pasear round the corner for a minute."

"Young feller," the sheriff said gruffly, "I ain't even started on you yet. Git goin' now. You, Blair, come along too."

He waited to let Johnny precede him. That, plus the fact that he hadn't asked for Johnny's gun, made him a pretty able man in Johnny's reckoning.

one side while Johnny, opposite the big man, kept his hands in sight in the occupation of rolling a cigarette. The officer fixed him with cold eyes.

"I'm kinda seery," he said mildly, "of a feller's handy with his iron as you appear to be. Ever'body knows the ordinary cowpokes couldn't hit a flyin' barn door."

Johnny took off his sombrero, turned it back to the sheriff and indicated the bullet hole.

"That's where she went in," he said.

"If that's part of your story, we'll come to it later. Son, I never aims to call any man a liar less I have the goods on him proper an' less I figger I kin get the drop on him. Ed Cleaver spoke as how I knowed you and I know I never afore set eyes on you. How come?"

Johnny grinned.

"I figure if a man I trust told me enough about a feller, I'd know that other feller too. And if you trust John Buxton, over to Gilead, as much's I do, s'pose you ask him about me. Johnny Hardluck they call me."

"We'll let that set," the sheriff said dryly. "Now Charley Knapp come in with a purty tall story, an' I don't mind tellin' both o' you that ever'body in town's right stirred up an' that means word'll go out to the other ranches pronto. If you got anything to say, better git goin'."

Johnny told the story from the beginning, telling of the hoof marks he had pointed out to Dan Blair and explaining his belief, which was news to Dan, that Zeke had shot at him in mistake for the lad, Jim Larkin, who had ridden the horse with the bent shoe nail. He told the rest of it tersely. He couldn't tell its effect by any change of expression on the big sheriff's face.

"What'd Jim Larkin have to say about it?" he asked.

"Wasn't around and we wanted to get in to see you fast."

Sheriff Tom Adler eased himself forward, took the gun from his desk and shoved it into the holster. He sat there a moment, drumming his big fingers on the desk top and staring out the window at his left. Suddenly he stood up, turned to the wall and took from a peg another belt with a six gun attached to it. He buckled this around his waist and stepped toward

CHAPTER

3

Time to Fight

They sat in the sheriff's dingy, smoke-filled office. The sheriff had eased his bulk into a complaining chair; his gun was on the desk before him. Dan sat at

the door. His face looked set and grim.

Both Johnny and Dan Blair were on their feet, looking out. There were a dozen or so men coming toward the jail in a compact body. All wore pistols and one had a rifle. Another had a coil of rope over one arm. Without a word to the two men, Adler swung open the door and stepped outside, closing it behind him.

Johnny, watching from a corner of the window, saw the man with the rifle abruptly level his weapon and fire. The slug struck high on the squat building.

"That's just a notice, Adler," a voice shouted. "We're goin' to have that feller outa there."

"I'll remember, Carey," Tom Adler called back, "just how you served that notice. That's far enough, boys. Now what d'you think you're up to?"

"We're goin' to hang that there wet brander," two or three yelled together.

"Sho, now. Any you fellers seen any wet brandin' done?"

"Knapp did," a man shouted.

"That goes to show," the sheriff said mildly, "how far off folks kin get. Accordin' to what Charley told me, he didn't see any neither. 'Nother thing—the job of hangin' belongs to me. I'm goin' to

find what's in this talk. If there's any stretchin' to be done, I'll do it proper."

"That don't satisfy us."

"Then perhaps this will," the sheriff called back. "You fellers next to Carey, get outa the way." Johnny saw the hasty scramble until the rifleman stood alone. "Now, Carey, I don't know whether you're drunk or just fool-minded, but you shot at an officer of the law and that makes you a criminal. I'll give you a chance. Start usin' that there rifle or drop it at your feet."

Johnny grabbed his gun from the holster. He was ready for a dash to the door.

Carey hesitated only briefly; then the Winchester thudded on the ground.

"Leave it there and git on home," the sheriff told him. "If the rest of you had more sense an' less whiskey in your heads, you'd see Knapp sent you to do an errand he knew better 'n try himself. He knows I'm goin' to the bottom of this. You fellers're given me the idea he don't want me to go too far. You go tell that to Knapp for me."

JOHNNY holstered his pistol as he saw the little crowd turn and straggle away. Sheriff Adler walked out, picked



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up Carey's rifle and came back with it. "Wish you'd tell me something, Sheriff," Johnny said. "Was Zeke Tanner and Shad Gilly and Toni Land all Knapp's men before Blair come here?"

The sheriff nodded. "He 'lowed it was only neighborly to git a new man some good help." He turned to Dan. "Blair, you got women folks out to your place?"

"Yes. My sister, Ramirez' daughter and some help."

The sheriff looked back at Johnny. There was an almost roguish light in his eyes.

"I've heerd 'bout you afore, Johnny Hardluck. Boys," he said more soberly, "you've got yourself a tight. Charley Knapp ain't liked too much by the other ranchers, but neither is rustlin' and wet brandin'. Like 's not fellers 've gone out to spread th' news. Reckon you'd oughter get back."

"Dan has a buckboard and team here in town, Sheriff," Johnny said. "Happen you'd know a-couple of good men who'd ride it out for him?"

"Now that's an idea, son. You boys wait here. I got to see Sam a minnit."

Dan Blair looked worried and puzzled.

"What do you make of it, Johnny?"

"Right now he's gone for our hosses. Don't want to risk any more shooting round here. He told us to expect a raid any time."

"Will he do anything?"

"John Buxton told me Tom's an awful good man to ride the river with. And when I think of that second Walking K. puncher, I reckon you are too, Dan."

"The way you and the rest talk out here," Dan grumbled, "I guess I'll have to learn the language."

The sheriff brought their mounts to the back of the jail and unlocked the door for them.

"Reckon I'd keep outa that cut o' woods, boys," he told them. "So long."

They arrived at the ranch house an-hour before dusk. Johnny saw two grizzled oldsters beside the house corral. Lolita and an old Mex were standing near them engaging them in talk. Then Jim Larkin came from the bunkhouse and walked slowly forward. There seemed to Johnny an air of tension and expectancy about all of them. Lolita ran forward to meet

them. Ignoring Dan, she came up to Johnny.

"You're back safe, Juanito. I'm so glad."

Dan asked, "Where is Toni Land? You seen anything of him, Hank?"

The two old fellows got to their feet.

"Sure, I seen him take his turkey and hightail off for town, coupla hours back. You didn't meet him?"

"No. Didn't he say anything about leaving?"

Hank glanced at the young puncher who was hanging back a little.

"I had some words with him, Mr. Blair," Jim said reluctantly. "Hope I didn't do anything wrong."

"You caught him in the coulee," Johnny put in.

"Well, I was ridin' the rim and seen Tom down there. He'd throwed a cow. I happened to look around and I reckon Zeke was ridin' herd on Toni. He weren't very near but I see him up and drag his rifle and come atootin'. It looked kinder onhealthy thereabouts so I rid off th' mesa."

He looked at Johnny and grinned, and Johnny grinned back at him.

"I figure you owe me a hat, Jim," he said. "But we got something else to figure on right now."

Ever since Sheriff Tom Adler had asked if there were any women on the Lazy B, Johnny had been speculating on how he and Dan, with a few hands, could stand off an aroused countryside until the truth of the wet branding could be proved and hammered into the hard heads of the frontiersmen. The news that a rustler was in their midst had the same effect as the report of a coming Indian raid. All able men would gather to wipe out the menace.

Johnny had debated the wisdom of sticking in town in an effort to establish his own innocence and Knapp's guilt, but he didn't ponder that long. The proof of the matter was back at the ranch, in the persons of Jim Larkin and the now missing Toni Land. Moreover, Knapp's lies had thrown Dan Blair into the tangle and, although Johnny didn't tell him, he was aware that Dan was in as much danger of lynching as Johnny himself.

As for Judith Blair and Lolita, there

was no place of safety where they could be sent. Very soon now bullets would be flying recklessly around, and the girls would have to take their chances with the men.

Johnny didn't stand idly around to think out the matter. He had already decided on the thing to be done. Jim Larkin's information did not change it. They had plausible proof, but they could do nothing with it until some blood letting cooled men off enough to listen.

There were a half dozen fine animals in the house corral, and Johnny's first act was to instruct Ramirez to lead them off where the raiders would be least apt to come across them. He suggested to Lolita, and Judith also, that they accompany the old man. Lolita refused pointblank.

"There will be fight, no? I stay with you."

Judith, a little pale but very quiet, wouldn't leave her brother. Johnny had no time to argue, and sent them inside to gather all the mattresses and place them securely before the windows on the lower floor.

Under his directions, the two oldsters, Hank Bowers and Hi Wunce, went out a short distance on either side of the main house to watch for the coming raiders. Each carried his rifle and sixgun. They were told to come in fast on the first appearance of horsemen.

Johnny had a pretty good idea of the lay of the buildings but he made another quick survey. The main house stood somewhat aloof from the other buildings and sheds. The barn was well removed, and a quick glance showed that it held little of particular value except a couple of milk cows. He had Jim drive the cows out.

Beside it were a tool shed and an open-sided forge. Johnny came back to the shed, again noted its distance from the barn and raised a wet finger in the air to gauge the strength and direction of the evening breeze. He turned to Dan Blair.

"WE OUGHT to have some light to shoot by," he said, "and I reckon this is it. 'Sides," he added, "if they see this burning, mebbe they'll leave the bunkhouse and the barn stand."

"Whatever you say, Johnny," Dan told

him. "But why don't you go on your way while you have the chance? If you aren't here, perhaps they'll leave us alone."

"You ain't foolin' me, Dan. You know you're dabbled with Knapp's tar brush same's me. S'pose you get the best of the tools into the forge while Jim and me build some kindling other end of the house."

What bothered Johnny greatly were several cottonwoods scattered not far from the house; they would give the attackers good protection at short range. Awareness of this danger had given him the idea of fires to light the scene.

They had barely completed this chore when they heard Hank Bowers call.

"Some critters 're acomin'!"

Johnny ran out to him and distinctly heard the pounding thud of running horses. He was about to call a retreat to the house when his keen ears detected the creaking sound of wagon wheels. A moment later Dan's pair and buckboard heaved in sight over the edge of the mesa. He hopped aboard when the wagon was beside him. There were two men in it.

"Keep going," he said. "The next one you hear, Hank, come on in arunning."

They drew up in the yard and all three clambered out. Johnny saw that both strangers were youngish fellows. To his surprise, each had a deputy badge on his chest. The elder held out his hand.

"From what Tom told us 'bout you, Johnny Hardluck, we're on your side. I reckon this's 'bout the toughest tight you ever bungled into. I'm Pete Harris and this t'other sidewinder's Al Cole."

His keen eyes looked around and fixed on a mattress-blocked window. He grinned.

"Looks like you gittin' ready fer company, Johnny. It's thisaway. Tom told me if they's any decent fellers in the crowd, like th' Goodalls, say, I was to stick out my badge an' try talkin' reason into 'em. But I won't fool you. Every tough lad in town's got out his shootin' iron."

Johnny turned to the others.

"Jim," he directed, "you go down to the pile we made. Al, there's a fuse on the threshold of that shed yonder. I cut 'em to burn 'bout five minutes 'fore it hits the loose powder. That ought to give you time to do your palaverin', Pete. When

you hear they're comin', Al, touch her off and git in with us. Better strip the team, Dan, and turn 'em loose. Come on inside, Pete."

The main house, of two stories, was oblong in shape. The great living room took up the most of the space. There were seven windows where men could be stationed, and Johnny had just that number of men at his command. Each window had its mattress propped to cover at least the lower half. The walls of the house were of good, heavy lumber. Pete nodded his approval.

"If it comes to a shoot-out," he drawled, "dunno but I'd rather be in here than out there."

"Hope this won't get you into trouble," Dan Blair told him.

"Mister, they's some right tough hombres here'bouts that by rights should be in the big jailhouse. Fellers start shootin' at me an' I reckon in the dark I couldn't tell but it might be one of them."

The girls had prepared a cold supper and Judith suggested they eat while they could. She came over to Johnny.

"However this may come out, Johnny," she said very quietly, "I want to thank you. Dan told me enough so I know we never could hold this place against Knapp without you."

"I told you before," Johnny said, "that I sure admire that gumption of yours. Mebbe it won't be so bad."

Her arm went around his muscled body. She gave him a squeeze, then went in to help with the food.

It was very quiet. No one seated himself; there was no sound of dishes, of clattering knives and forks. The men took the cold meat and bread handed them, the cake and pie that followed, and ate for the most part in silence. At times Johnny and Pete Harris exchanged low-voiced sallies, but everyone was listening with dread or grim calmness.

Lolita kept close beside Johnny Hardluck, plying him with food from her plate, taking nothing herself, her face turned up to his in the semidarkness, her eyes watching his every little move. Johnny couldn't altogether be unaware of her dark eyes with their almost pleading expression, but he too was waiting for the first heralding of action from the open front door.

CHAPTER

4

Flaming Arrows

It came in a yell from old Hank Bower. Food was instantly forgotten. There was the tramp of running feet, then Jim Larkin and Al Cole entered. Johnny quickly assigned the men to their places: Al and Hank in the kitchen; Dan Blair and Hi to the two windows in the dining place; Jim Larkin to the bedroom.

Johnny himself had chosen the window to the left of doorway, leaving the other to Pete Harris. Already his Winchester was leaning beside his post, with cartridges spread on a chair. He took up the rifle and stepped up to Harris. Both could now hear the thunder of racing hoofs.

"Going to palaver, Pete?" Johnny asked.

"Sure." Pete swung the door wider.

Johnny turned and raced up the stairs. He entered the room over the doorway and raised the lower sash of the single window. He levered a cartridge into the chamber, left the weapon at full cock and leaned over the sill to watch and listen.

It was practically full darkness now. Off on the mesa he made out a moving shadow that soon resolved itself into a more solid substance. At a distance of fifty yards or so it stopped, and a voice shouted:

"You folks in th' house there. We've come for that rustlin' killer, and we're going to get him no matter what you do. Shove him out and we'll let you be."

Johnny raised the rifle stock to his cheek.

"That you, Thad Wilson?" he heard Pete call out. "This is Deputy Pete Harris."

"What the hell you doin' there, Harris?"

"You can't take the law in your hands," Pete called back. "I'm tellin' you to take your crowd and git goin'."

"The hell you say," another voice yelled.

A rifle spurted flame. Johnny fired at the flash. A shrill cry followed; there was a lot of shouting, and the shadowy mass shifted. A half dozen rifles flared, their lead thudding against the wall beside Johnny's window, smashing the glass and

tearing into the back wall. But Johnny was already running down stairs.

He'd heard the heavy oak door thud closed. As he rushed to his own post, he called to ask Pete if he'd been hit.

"Nicked my arm," Pete growled back. "Wilson bein' there means the tough crowd I spoke about. Reckon Knapp's there, too. Aw right, they've asked for it."

Rifles were crashing outside; lead pounded at the walls, splintering glass, making the mattresses jump. Except for Johnny's one shot there had been no further reply from the house.

"Dan," Johnny called above the uproar, "the fire'll be goin' in a minnit. Watch out for the fellers behind the trees."

He reached out to make sure just where his extra cartridges were and a soft hand encountered his.

"I'm right here, Juanito," Lolita said. "Give me your rifle when it ees empty and I load it."

"Good girl. Keep down below the window, back of me. Judith," he called. "Where are you?"

"In here with Dan."

"Stick close in the corner," he told her. "The shed will show up that end window."

"You theenk of Judith," Lolita said.

"You're here where I can look out for you. Watch out now."

There was a sudden almost dazzling flash of light that faded quickly, then began to grow in slower flame. It had been enough for Johnny to see a number of men running toward the house, half crouched, rifles ready. Evidently both Dan and Pete Harris saw them at the same time; the blasts of the three rifles seemed to tear the group apart. One or two fell to lie motionless. Another tottered to the ground then started to crawl away. A couple turned and ran.

Further back, Johnny saw some men on horseback and sent some lead at them. Then a bullet, from an angle to his left, smashed into the mattress inches from his face. Doggedly he widened his porthole, knowing that a second shot could follow as fast as the man could work lever and pull trigger.

As quickly as he saw the man's head and shoulder leaning out from behind the

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tree, his sights were on the target. In the same instant he pulled trigger, feeling the push of the gun against his shoulder, the breath of a passing object that fanned his cheek. It was that close.

Johnny levered another cartridge instantly, sought the tree as the smoke cleared and found it without the protruding form. Looking lower, he made out a crumpled figure at the tree's base. He drew a long sigh of relief. He had been lucky.

He sought the other cottonwoods in his range of vision, hearing, between his own shots, the whiplike crack of Dan Blair's sporting rifle, the crashing discharges of Pete Harris' Winchester. The light from the two bonfires, steadily increasing as the flames took hold of the dry wood, illuminated the entire grove before the house. Both the shed and the second burning pile were well placed; the three front windows were comparatively in shadow. It wasn't long before the tree trunks were cleared of a single skulker. Shots from that sector ceased altogether, but rifles from a longer distance still hammered.

Johnny sought to follow the light deeper over the mesa but could make out no clear target. He satisfied himself by spaced shots at the flashes which, if nothing more, showed that the defenders were still in action. Soon he pulled trigger on an empty chamber. He pulled in the rifle, reaching for the loose cartridges beside him.

Lolita's hand checked it, then reached higher to his neck. Her other arm went around his shoulder, pulling him toward her, and suddenly he felt her warm lips on his cheek.

"You are so brave," she whispered.

"Keep down, Lolita," he said a little gruffly. "This has just started."

He turned a little to push her away; her lips brushed his mouth. She sighed.

"We mus' come through this, Juanito. Give me the rifle. I weel load it. I fight for you, Juanito."

H E RELINQUISHED the weapon and drew his six-gun, trying to keep his thoughts only on the matter at hand. In the brief interlude, he became aware that the firing had practically stopped from the attackers, and both Dan and Pete

Harris now were not shooting any more.

Several minutes of nerve-wracking silence followed. Johnny did not relax his vigilance. His eyes roved continuously, seeking moving forms but without result.

Off to his left he heard old Hi Wunce cackling.

"I gotcha beat, Hank," the old fellow chuckled. "I got all the vittles right here. Want me to fetch you some?"

"You keep your mind on your business," Hank answered sourly. "This ain't no time to stuff your belly."

Johnny heard the low murmur of Dan and Judith speaking to each other. Then, with his eyes glued to his peephole he saw something that made him forget everything else.

It appeared in the form of a white spot where the light faintly reached it, drew closer. It was a light bandanna carried between two horsemen, each with a hand raised to hold it aloft.

"Flag o' truce and a coupla lying sidewinders," Pete Harris growled.

The two riders came to within shouting distance and stopped.

"That's Thad Wilson on the right, Johnny," Pete said. "And t'other's Charley Knapp. I'm sure tempted, Johnny."

"Harris," Wilson called. "Reckon this's gone far enough. You goin' to let us come in peace'able an' get that feller?"

"You've made yourself an outlaw, Wilson," Deputy Pete shouted back. "You an' Knapp both. We got our sights on you. Speak your piece an' git goin'." Johnny saw the flag of truce waver a little.

"Aw right," Wilson yelled. "We got fifty more men comin'. And we aims to burn down that thar house. If you got any women folks send 'em out."

"Don't make me go," Lolita pleaded.

"You won't," Johnny answered.

"Injun talk," Pete Harris muttered. "Something's makin'."

"I'm telling you—" Knapp shouted, but what it was they never heard.

From the kitchen came the deafening roar of swiftly fired rifles; one, two, three, four. As the echoes died, Johnny heard Al Cole laugh.

"S'prised 'em, huh, Hank?"

Pete Harris' rifle crashed in the big room; then volleys came from outside at

each end of the long building. Glass crashed and splintered. Hi Wunce cursed but his rifle kept right on. Lead thundered against the walls like big hail stones.

From the bedroom, Jim Larkin spoke for the first time:

"I got me 'bout a dozen out here. Mebbe they'll come round your way, Johnny."

"Dan, you and Pete watch out," Johnny called. He ran across the big room to Jim's window.

"Just in time," Jim drawled. "I gotta load up."

Johnny took a quick look and saw a number of forms skipping from tree to tree and each time nearer. One or two shots came from them but were hurriedly aimed. They were obviously intent on a rush. Johnny put aside his rifle and drew his Colt. He pushed the mattress well aside to give him room.

They were abreast of the fire now, separating in a little group on either side. He heard one call out a command, then they were rushing, zigzagging like Indians in a raid.

The light was good enough. He shot carefully the full six cartridges he'd put into the cylinder, shoved the gun away and reached for his rifle. Jim Larkin pushed him gently aside.

"Reckon I can take 'em now. My gosh," he exploded. "Where'n hell are they? You didn't leave any." His rifle crashed once, twice. "That'll keep 'em skedaddlin', what's left of th' bunch."

Johnny turned back. He heard Lolita call to him as he made for the stairs but had no time to answer. He came to the end bedroom and approached the window cautiously. From this greater height he could see beyond the shed and, partly guided by rifle flashes, he soon made out some forms in the forge and others at the front corners of the barn. These attackers were firing steadily, apparently having been told to cover the rush from the opposite end and not yet aware of its defeat.

Standing a little back from the window, Johnny got his aim, fired four careful shots at the men by the barn, then poured the rest of his bullets into the forge. He ducked down to reload and listen.

To his amazement, there were no further answering shots. Even the two

rifles downstairs had fallen silent. With his magazine full and one in the chamber, he set the hammer at half-cock and went below.

"What'd you make of it?" he asked Pete Harris. "This can't be the end of it."

"No such luck. I know that bunch, and they know what Tom Adler'll do if he gits his hands on 'em. They won't want to leave any of us to tell our story." He had spoken in low tone so that his dismal words would not carry to the others. "Johnny, wish you'd twist this bandanna round my arm. Gittin' a little onsteady."

A slit of light came through Hi's window and by it Johnny could see Pete's hand covered with blood. He ripped the shirt sleeve and found where the bullet had gashed Pete's upper arm. It wasn't a serious wound but had evidently bled quite steadily. Johnny finished the binding and Pete leaned close to him.

"Hope it won't be held against me," he muttered, "but my sights was on Thad Wilson. When th' firin' started an' he dropped his flag and turned to high-tail it, I jes' plumb let him have it."

"So that'll leave only Knapp to head 'em."

"Tom figgers him just as bad. Part Injun. Kinder wish you'd taken him too."

THERE was complete silence outside. As the minutes passed it became increasingly oppressive. Both fires died down to smouldering embers that occasionally gave little spurts of brief flames, then disappeared altogether.

An hour went by. Then Hi Wunce called softly from his window.

"Sunthin' kinder funny out yere."

Johnny went over to him. Out by the shadowy bulk of the bunkhouse, about seventy-five yards away, he saw a faint glow that abruptly became a spot of light and flew upward in a long arc. It was checked by an intervening branch of a cottonwood, where it hung until it had burned itself out.

Hi cocked his rifle but Johnny checked him. He went swiftly into the kitchen.

"Hank," he said, "get that door open and don't make any noise about it."

In a moment he was outside. He kept his hand on the butt of his Colt as he bent low to the ground and moved along as

stealthy and undetectable as any Indian.

He passed the forge in a long circling move, and went beyond the house corral and the barn before starting back toward the bunkhouse. Once he paused and lay flat while another flaming arrow arced upward to fall just short of the verandah.

He came to the rear of the bunkhouse and found the door standing open. He heard voices muttering inside, and recognized Knapp's.

"Soak this one plenty, Bill," the rancher said, "and don't light her till I draw her full. We only need one."

Without sound, Johnny stepped inside and crouched at one side of the doorway.

Knapp held the match to light the arrow.

Johnny called, "Okay, fellers, hold it!"

There was an oath, a scurry of movement. Johnny fired, then skipped to the other side of the doorway. A gun flashed and Johnny shot again. He moved, crouched low to the floor and waited. Something heavy thudded to the floor.

Johnny went forward, struck a match with his left hand, gun ready in his right. He blew out the flame quickly. Pete Harris had got his wish about Knapp.

He gathered up the bow and arrows when he heard excited yelling off to his left. He stuck his head outside to listen.

"Here come th' rest of th' boys," a man shouted. "We'll swarm 'em out now."

Johnny waited no longer. Headless of discovery, he streaked for the kitchen door.

"A new bunch comin'," he called as he got inside, but Pete Harris was standing in the open doorway, grinning.

"I reckon," Pete drawled, "I'd know that bellow in a million. That's Tom Adler out there an' he musta brought th' Goodalls. 'Bout time, I'd say."

* * *

There was light in the big living room, in the kitchen, all over the house. There'd been hot coffee and those who had been denied their supper had made up for it.

Sheriff Tom Adler had taken his departure, along with an upstanding man he'd introduced as George Goodall. Pete Harris had gone with him, to have his wound attended to and to help convoy the several prisoners Tom Adler had corraled.

The range was safe now. The Blairs would have nothing more to fear.

Johnny Hardluck was in the living room and a very embarrassed young man. Judith Blair was one of the prettiest girls Johnny had ever met. Right now she had hold of both Johnny's arms, and was telling him that she owed him everything. Her face was uplifted to his; her lips were smiling and warm, and the pressure of her hands seemed to be pulling Johnny toward herself. He was completely abashed.

She gave him a little shake. "Oh, we'll talk of so many things tomorrow, Johnny." She gave him a parting smile and turned to the stairs.

Johnny had almost forgotten Lolita, whom he supposed was in the kitchen. A slight sound warned him.

He turned and saw Lolita. Her right hand was drawn back and in it was a glittering knife. Her flashing eyes were fixed on Judith's lovely back.

Johnny moved. His hand caught hers as it started forward, held it. The knife clattered a little as it fell to the floor. Lolita turned her face to him. Her eyes were filled with horror, and quick tears.

"Oh, Johnny," she gasped, "you just saved me from a terrible thing!"

She was a half head shorter than Johnny, but she made up that difference by a little leap of her lithe body. Her arms clasped his neck; her kisses were all over his face; her dark eyes closed.

But Johnny's eyes were open and he saw Judith turn and stare at them briefly, and he saw the disdainful toss of her head as she marched up the stairs.

There was a discreet cough from kitchenward. Johnny disentangled himself and went forward to Dan Blair.

"We got all the horses in," Dan said. He was trying to smother a smile.

"Reckon I'll have a look at the bay," Johnny said.

He had the saddle on the big fellow, his slicker roll behind the cantle, when Dan Blair came to him with outstretched hand.

"I guess I understand, Johnny," he said. "But I want you to promise to come back. And someone else here will want you to, when I tell my story."

Johnny grinned down at him, waved a hand and rode off into the darkness.

The kid who swaggered up to Slim's fire was homesick as a mammyless calf—and damnation-bent to prove himself a . . .

MAN AMONG BADMEN



By
DAN

CUSHMAN



Slim said, "Now get
me inside that store."



THERE was a tinkle of bridle links off in the prairie night, and Texas Slim paused with his thumb hovering over the strings of his guitar to listen. He was about thirty, lean and burned dark by years of drifting from the Brazos all the way to Milk River.

"Visitors," he said, once again bringing sound from the guitar strings.

There were two other men at the fire. One of them, a heavy, disreputable-look-

ing saddle tramp named Steve Jumper, got up on one knee to peer off in the darkness, but with fire brightness in his eyes he was unable to make out anything.

"Hope they ain't moochers. You can stretch one pot o' beans just so far."

The third man, a Mexican named Lerdos, kept breaking off dry bits of thistle and tossing them in the fire where they hissed up in bright, bluish flame. He would have given the appearance of com-

plete disinterest had it not been for a casual hitch of his forty-five Colt.

There was no sound from the approaching riders now. They were looking over the camp. Then, apparently satisfied, they rode into the circle of firelight and dismounted. There were two of them—one a lean, suspicious-faced man of twenty-five, the other heavier but little more than a boy.

The older man dropped his bridle reins and came forward with a slight jingle of spurs, "Give us a song, Slim," he said.

Texas Slim wasn't surprised to be recognized. He plucked the guitar with a swift, graceful rhythm and sang a few lines of "Green Grow the Lilacs" in his soft, Southern voice. Then he said, "Hello, Fenton."

Fenton was smiling, but there was a tautness in his attitude, and narrow suspicion in his eyes. He was handsome in a way. Dressed well. He wore crossweave California pants that were wrinkled to the insides of his legs from long riding. His hat and boots were dusty and expensive. On his right thigh was a pearl-handled Colt forty-five.

After scrutinizing each of the men, he looked down at the bubbling pot of beans with lips showing distaste. "You haven't got much bacon in this damned pot, have you?"

Steve Jumper hunched forward, his eyes small and belligerent, but he didn't say anything. Texas Slim still picked music from his guitar. It was Lerdos who answered.

"Leetle bacon. Everyone put in some-theeng. Jumper put in beans, I put in bacon."

Slim drawled, "I put in the water."

Fenton had turned on the Mexican with his body more than ever taut. "If you mean I ought to go rustle my own grub, say it!" Then to the camp in general, "I never did see a greaser that wouldn't bite from behind."

"Don' call me greaser." Lerdos whispered the words, rising to one knee.

"The hell with you. You keep away from that gun or I'll put a bullet right between your eyes."

Despite the words, it was apparent that Fenton wasn't looking for a fight over anything of as little concern as a pot of

bean stew. Besides, there was a sheriff yonder in Moxton, and the Wells Fargo Company had posted a reward for him. His eyes rested on Jumper. "You, whis-kers. Here's a buck. Ride in there to Moxton and fetch some bacon."

Jumper remained sprawled on the ground. "I'm fired. I rode clean from Alkali Springs since morning."

Fenton was still holding the dollar out with his left hand.

Jumper said, "Why don't you send the button in for it if you're scared of the sheriff?"

"Who you callin' a button?" the kid said. He spoke through tight lips the way Fenton did.

Texas Slim laid the guitar aside and stood up. "I got a bit o' bacon yonder in my grub can, if this ain't enough. What's got into you, Fenton? Been drinkin' too much alkey-water? You're as ornery as a mule driver."

He limped off on his spavined legs, got a two-pound square of bacon, and stood over the bean stew, cutting it in chunks with his clasp knife.

Fenton softened a trifle then, and stood warming his hands by the fire. The kid got out Durham and papers to roll a cigarette, but Slim noticed his eyes kept shifting to the lamp-lighted windows of Moxton off in distance while he was licking it into shape. Slim had met the kid before, but he saw so many faces drifting across the country that it took him a while to pin it down. It was at a drifters' fire a good deal like this one that some saddle tramps had built among the cottonwoods just outside of Chinook. That night the kid had talked about riding for the War-bonnet, but Johnny Mills said he was only *segundo* to the crumb boss.

"Moxton's your home town, ain't it?" Slim asked him.

THE kid jerked as though Slim's easy tone were a needle in his flesh. His eyes traveled over to Fenton, who was looking at him narrow-eyed and slightly smiling.

"Moxton?" the kid said as though he'd never heard the town's name before.

"Sure, Moxton. You told me it was your home town. Don't you remember me? I was camped down by the river at

Chlnook when you came in on that lame-footed roan."

"I forgot," the kid said, trying to make his voice sound careless.

"I get homesick myself now and then. For Texas. Only Texas is mighty big and I never can remember just which town is home."

"I'm not homesick."

Steve Jumper snorted. "That's how it is with nine-tenths of these slicks that call themselves cowpunchers these days. One month in a line shanty and they get lonesome to kick their boots under the old man's table."

"I'm not goin' home!" the kid said.

"You *are* home, ain't you?"

"Lay off'n him," Fenton said. He still had that thoughtful, smiling expression on his face. "Why didn't you tell me this was your home roost? You said you were on the loose."

"I am on the loose. I came back for a damned good reason." He felt the need of swaggering a little to reestablish himself as a drifter among drifters. "A damned, good, private reason."

Jumper said, "But now you're here you'll just sort of drop around and have some supper with Paw."

"Like hell I will!"

Slim had picked up his guitar again, and he talked softly over its strings. "Sure wish I could drop in on my old pappy. We'd split a bottle of something, my pappy and me. Don't know where he is. He was cookin' for some damned blind-bridle

spread in Kansas the last I heard of him."

The kid glanced sidewise at Fenton. He struck a match with his thumbnail and lighted up, trying to make his face look old and cynical with one eye closed against the match blaze.

"Don't let 'em rib you, kid," Fenton said softly. "I knew when I saw that forty-five on your hip that you weren't any forty-a-mmonth hide-walloper."

The kid nodded and inhaled without taking the cigarette from his lips.

Lerdos said, "Eef I was returning to the town of my birth in Chihuahua, I would not hunt for revenge. I—"

"Keep still," Fenton growled. Then to the kid, softly, "You're not looking to bounce lead off anybody. You're out after a pocketful of the easy-come. Right?"

"Right."

The kid looked at Jumper, and around at the others with his lips imitating Fenton's smile.

Fenton hunkered and jerked his head for the kid to come down beside him. "Tonight?" he asked softly.

The kid gave him a sharp glance. For a second he looked scared. "I thought you were headed for Miles."

"Miles can wait. You cut me in on this one, kid, and I'll cut you in on mine."

The kid didn't answer. He was dragging hard on his cigarette, gazing into the red heart of the fire.

Fenton waited for fifteen or twenty seconds, then he got up and jerked his head toward the darkness, "Come on, kid.

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What do you say we rustle some wood for the fire?"

The camp was silent after they were gone. Lerdos and Jumper seemed tense, waiting for something to happen. Texas Slim, however, merely thrummed his guitar, and after a while commenced to sing. His voice was tenor, flexible, and with a sad lonesomeness that blended with the September night.

*They feed in the coulee,
They water in the draw,
Their coats are all matted,
Their backs are all raw. . .*

In about ten minutes Fenton and the kid came back carrying some gnarled sticks of sage which they dumped in the fire. After that there was nothing said for a long time while they waited for the stew to cook.

"Hear about Dakota John?" Slim asked Fenton. "Railroad marshal got him up at Shelby Junction." He pointed a finger at his forehead and made a movement with his thumb to indicate a gun hammer falling. "Saw him sitting in a game at Shorty's Saloon, and *wham*."

"Didn't he try to arrest him?" the kid asked.

"Arrest him? Why'n hell would he arrest him and go to all that expense? You once get on the wrong side of the law and it's always open season. You'll be sittin' at a drifters' fire like this and all of a sudden, there's a bullet from out in the dark."

FENTON said, "Dakota John had it coming. He was a damn fool to hang around the junction after he robbed that express office."

"Remember Highpockets? Highpockets came riding in to Mavery one evening—"

"Lay off the kid!" Fenton said. "There's been lead tossed at me, too, but none of it connected." He slapped the gun on his thigh and winked at the kid. "Guess maybe we'll do a little barking on our own if the cards fall that way. Nobody but a damn fool works cows for a chippy forty a month. Take her the easy way and spend 'er free, that's for us, isn't it, Kid?"

"Sure," the kid grinned. "What the hell?"

Lerdos stood up, got a tin plate, dipped some beans. Then he drew a long-bladed bowie and commenced spearing bacon.

"Keep your hooks out of that bacon!" Fenton barked.

Lerdos spun with the knife held underhand. Fenton was on one knee, the tips of his fingers resting on the earth. For a moment there was no sound save for the crackling fire, the soft hiss of September wind through the sagebrush.

Lerdos spoke, a bare whisper, "I toss in thee bacon. So I will eat it."

"Well, take your bacon and drift. I'm not eatin' with a greaser."

Lerdos made a move, and Fenton thought he was either going to draw his gun or charge with the bowie. He rocked back, drawing the pearl-handled Colt. Texas Slim was between them. He had Fenton by the wrist, pinning the gun to earth.

"Get out!" Fenton hissed, writhing back and forth. "Get out, you damned greaser."

Lerdos backed away from the fire, and Slim let go Fenton's hand. Fenton backed away from the light and waited until he heard the sound of Lerdos riding away. Then he laughed.

"Thanks for stopping me," he said to Slim. "But that greaser made me so damned mad—"

"Sure. Only look out for him. I wouldn't blame him a hell of a lot if he got you in the back."

Fenton squatted close to Slim and said, "I always liked you, Slim." His voice was so soft that Slim had to turn one ear to catch it. "Always liked *you*, knew you were on the square. So maybe you'd like to have some gold coin in your kick. How about it?"

Slim made no move. He softly played the guitar, waited.

"The kid; yonder. His dad runs a store in Moxton. It's Saturday. Ranchers day in town. Bank closed at noon, so the big afternoon's take is all in the drawer. The kid knows where it'll be."

"Where do I come in?"

"The kid might back down. I'll need you to keep an eye on him."

"Sho-sho!" said Slim softly.

"The old man locks up about now, but he'll be there counting up till after midnight. We won't break in. No guns, no rough stuff. All I want is for the kid to be standing there by the front door. Get it? Just standing there so the old man'll see him."

Slim smiled, his eyes dreamy in the fire.

Fenton went on, "The old man's probably been ripping his hair out worrying ever since the kid went on the loose. He won't even think of that money when he sees the kid at the door. He'll start for the door, and what will the kid do? Take it on the lobe. Maybe the old man takes time to lock up, and maybe he doesn't. Anyhow there's the money, and we grab it. Easy touch, and what the hell? That money will spend as good as if we took it off an express car with Gatling guns."

"Kid help you think o' that?"

"Hell, no. He's here because he's homesick. Loaded me with a lot of gun-slinger talk, and when it turned out this was his home town he had to come up with an excuse. That's why I'll need you to keep him in line. Cut you in on a third. Is it a deal, Slim?"

"How about the kid? Does he get another third?"

Fenton laughed and probed at his teeth with a stiff spear of buffalo grass. "The kid'll get a little experience."

"All right. A third it is."

THE kid pretended to be interested in the beans, but his eyes kept wandering over, and he was wondering what the low talk was about. Fenton jerked his head for him to come over.

"Yeah?"

"Slim's in. Little ten per cent. He'll back you up while you're wig-waggin' the old man. I wouldn't want any town marshal gunnin' you from behind. Good enough?"

"Good enough." The kid was sick from the thing his brag had sucked him into, but he tried to swagger out of it.

Fenton stood and stretched. "Those beans will be hard for an hour yet. Think I'll drift over town and look around."

Jumper knew there was something up, but he was smart enough not to ask ques-

tions. He said, not looking at anybody: "When the beans are cooked, I'm eating 'em and them that comes in late takes leavin's."

Slim got a gun and belt from his war-bag and strapped them on. Then he saddled a small, dog-gentle pinto horse and the three set off for town, riding abreast.

Moxton was a couple of miles off. It was like a hundred other western towns that had sprung up at stock shipping points along the railroads—fifty or sixty scattered shacks and houses, some false-fronted buildings along the main street, a depot, stockyards.

"That the store?" Fenton asked, jerking his head toward a big, frame building set back a trifle from the street.

The kid wet his lips and gulped before answering. "That's it."

Fenton said, "We better take it down the back way."

They tied their horses in deep shadow beside some saloon ice houses, and went on afoot. Down the street, cowboys were whooping and clomp-clomping along the platform walks, but near the store everything seemed deserted.

A kerosene lamp was burning in the rear of the store, and now and then they could see a man's shadow as he moved around.

"That him?" Fenton asked.

"Yeah," the kid breathed.

They waited three or four minutes. An old man with a black and white sheepdog at his heels walked toward some shacks. There was no one else.

"All right," Fenton said. "Slim, you and the kid wait here by the store. Keep under that frame awning by the left-hand side. I'll slip around to the other side and wait. Don't be in too big a hurry. Wait till the coast is clear. Then all you need to do is slip up to the front and flatten your nose against that window."

"Make a little noise so he'll see you. When he does, run like hell. Circle around and hide beneath the loading chute by the stockyards. Slim, you make sure nobody collars him from behind. Both of you got it straight?"

"Sure," the kid said with his swagger. "Sure, what the hell?"

"And don't be in a hurry to find me. I'll be around."

Fenton backed away, and disappeared in shadow. There were empty sugar barrels stacked beneath the frame awning on the east side of the store. It was too dark to see, but Slim could feel the nervous movements of the boy beside him.

"Old man beat you up so you decided to even up with him?" he asked.

"No."

"Why you got it in for him?"

The kid didn't answer.

"Your maw alive?"

"Yah."

"Why don't you go up and see her?"

The kid didn't say anything for about ten seconds. Then Slim could feel the effort as he jerked his shoulders and laughed. "Say, what the hell you tryin' to do? Talk me out of it?"

"Easy job. I could handle it without you."

"I ain't backin' out—"

"Of course not. It just seemed like a chippy way of doing it, coaxing the old man outside."

"Get it the easiest way, that's my motto." He was quoting Fenton, and trying to speak with Fenton's hard cynicism.

"Listen, the old man owes me plenty more than we'll touch him for tonight. So I'm not backing down. I'm cutting Fenton in on this deal, and he's cutting me in on one of his over in Miles. Then it's the Hole in the Wall for the two of us."

"How long you known Fenton?"

"Two-three days. Why?"

"Nothing. I just wondered why you trusted him so far."

"Listen, I don't go for this talking behind a man's back—"

"All right. Only I don't trust anybody. No farther than I can aim with my Colt. And I don't cotton much to a scheme that puts the jingle in somebody else's pocket and leaves me belly down in the manure beneath some cattle chute."

The kid bristled back, "Only trouble with you, you ain't satisfied with your ten per cent cut."

"No, I'm not satisfied with that, either."

THE kid was nervous, and a trifle scared. It made him talk with more swagger than ever. "Well, what you intend to do about it?"

"You know this store like the back of your hand, don't you?"

"Sure."

"Good. You're taking me inside it right now."

"I will like hell. Fenton said—"

Slim's hand had been resting on the butt of his sixgun. He eased it out of the holster and rammed the muzzle in the kid's ribs. The kid stiffened, and Slim spoke with a new, brittle note in his voice that commanded respect.

"You'll do just what I want you to."

Slim took the kid's gun. "Now get me inside that store."

The kid couldn't hide it now. He was scared of Slim. Sick-scared. He moved, feeling his way like a sleep walker. Slim didn't let him get more than a step ahead. In the back was a low-slung board awning, and a door with iron bars bolted over its window. At one side were some doors to a cellar stairway.

The kid got a stick and made several nervous jabs between the cellar doors. The stick got a bolt loose so he could lift one of the doors. Slim kept the gun in his back, and the kid led him down some lumpy stairs into a darkness smelling of rotted burlap and sprouting spuds. Slim held the kid's shirt because it was too dark to see anything.

After a while, a dim glow became discernible. It was reflected light from another stairway, the one leading to the main store room.

Someone was walking above, and there were voices.

"What the hell?" Slim asked.

"Customer," the kid whispered, short of breath. "He opens up—when somebody comes late."

It took a considerable time. Slim sat down on a case of canned goods, the gun resting on one knee. At last they left, and Slim heard one man walking back across the floor. Then it was so silent he could hear the tick-tick of the kid's cheap pocket watch.

Slim leisurely stood up. "I guess this is it."

"What you aim to do?" the kid asked in a whisper that was half a sob.

"What you suppose? I'll go up there and stick a gun in his guts and take what I want. We'll do it, that is. If he makes

a wrong move . . . Hell, Kid, you've ridden down the long coulee. You know the rules of this game as well as I do."

He seemed to be thinking. "I guess I'll let him have it anyway. Give me that bag." The kid handed him a folded, bur-lap. His hand trembled and something like a smile touched Slim's lips. "This'll muffle it. I'll shoot through the bag. Always remember that when you want to blast somebody private. You press it tight—"

"No. Don't kill him. It ain't necessary."

"I have to. Otherwise he'll run to the sheriff, and there I'll be with my tired horse. Anyway, what in hell do you care? One dead man more or less. It was you got the idea for sticking him up. A bullet fits in this deal just like a joker fits a straight."

The kid had one foot on the stairs, hand clutching the wooden rail. Overhead they could hear the jingle as a man stacked small change. The kid looked back, his scared eyes glistening in reflected lamp-light.

Something seemed to catch Slim's boot-heel. He turned and looked down, giving the kid his chance. It seemed to him that he had to wait for a long time before the kid moved.

The kid set his heels and swung a right to Slim's jaw.

The kid was young and strong. Darkness swirled across Slim's eyeballs, and the dirt floor seemed to come up to meet him.

His ears were buzzing. Somehow he got to his feet and reached the stairs. The

kid had dashed up the stairs and was shouting a terrified warning to the store-keeper.

"He'll kill you, Dad! He has a gun. He came here to rob the place. . . ."

His father was trying to calm him down. "Tommy! There's nothing to worry about, Tommy. They already caught him. A fellow named Fenton. His picture was up in the post office. A little Mex by the name of Lerdos tipped the sheriff off. Gardner was just telling me. They located him right here by the store. Tommy, come here. . . ."

Slim made it up the stairs. It was good to get outside. He ran down the alley to his pinto. He swung to the saddle and galloped toward the campfire that made a small, beckoning point of yellow across the flats.

* * *

Jumper was sleeping by the fire. He roused up and blinked as Slim swung down.

"How'd it go?"

"Toler'ble," said Slim with his old, easy smile.

He found his guitar, rolled it in a soog-in, and tied it to the back of his saddle.

Steve Jumper was still peering at him curiously.

"That jaw looks like you run into a blackjack."

Slim laughed and ran his fingers gently over his abused jaw. Who'd have thought the kid would have five silver dollars in his hand? He'd make a man, the kid would.

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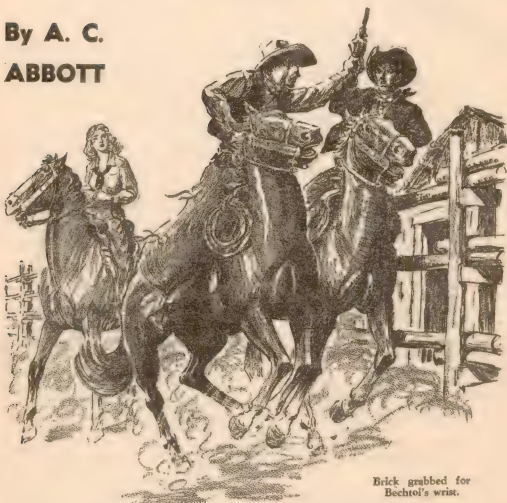
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PUNCHER'S PURGATORY

By A. C.
ABBOTT



Brick grabbed for
Bechtol's wrist.



*Brick Stevens was fed up with his
petticoat boss's jibes—but he couldn't
leave the lady to a rustling coyote.*

BRICK STEVENS pulled his horse to a sliding halt and leaped down beside the fair-haired girl who was picking herself up off the ground. "Are you hurt?" he queried anxiously.

"No!" Her voice snapped angrily and her violet eyes flashed at him with fury as she began brushing the dust off her new levis.

"What happened?"

"That fool horse—" she pointed a trembling finger at the sorrel standing apologetically ten feet away—"took off over this canyon and then found he couldn't maintain his flying speed. You saddled that horse for me." She swung back to Brick with her accusation. "Did you know he couldn't stand up?"

Brick felt the leap of an anger that was rapidly becoming chronic. "That's a good horse," he said evenly, "if the rider gives him half a chance."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

Brick's level blue eyes sparked fire under his wide hat brim, but he took a deep breath and clamped his jaw against further retort. "Nothin'," he said shortly. "If you're not hurt, Miss Emory, I'll get on after that steer."

"Mr. Stevens."

Brick poised with his left foot in the stirrup, stopped short by the very softness of her voice.

"Mr. Stevens, you're not showing much respect for your employer. It might interest you to know that Wayne Bechtol advised me a week ago to fire you."

Deliberately Brick swung onto King's back, settled himself in the saddle and lifted a steady hand for his tobacco sack. "Are you goin' to?"

"I don't know yet." She eyed him steadily, her face intent, her hair glinting gold in the burning sunlight. "Uncle Dave seemed to think you were a good foreman."

"Your Uncle Dave," Brick said levelly, "was easy to work for."

He saw by the stubborn set of her lips that she had grasped his implication. The two weeks since she had taken charge of Wheel Ranch had been irritating almost beyond endurance, but Brick had promised dying Dave Emory to stay on as foreman until this Eastern-born niece "got the hang of things." It was an exasperating, thankless job.

"Mr. Bechtol says," the girl went on bitingly, "that you're a conceited, red-headed fool, too irresponsible to run a ranch."

"Right thoughtful of him, I'm shore," Brick drawled acidly. "Reckon I could tell you a few things about Wayne, too, only I kinda like to pay my compliments to a man. Incidentally, who's runnin' the

Circle B these days while Bechtol spends all his time helpin' you with Wheel affairs?"

His tone stung her to renewed anger. "That's none of your business! Just why did you follow me up here, anyway? To laugh at me when I fell?"

"To help you with that steer."

"You thought I needed help, did you?"

"Well. . . ." Brick allowed a dry grin to spread across his lean face. "When you run a critter clear out of the country, Miss Emory, we call it rustlin'."

Touching his hat with cool politeness, he set spurs to his big brown horse and plunged up out of the brushy canyon on the track of the bunch-quitting steer.

"Someday," he told his horse grimly, "I'm gonna take that smilin' Mr. Bechtol apart and investigate his innards."

Brick had no trouble following the track and so was not hindered in the methodical exhaustion of his uncompimentary vocabulary. He swore at old Dave Emory for asking such a favor of a man, and at himself for being fool enough to give his word. He swore, not at the girl, but at the intolerable ignorance which would permit her to become friendly with a slick-eared maverick like Wayne Bechtol.

The Wheel crew had been working from daylight until dark for weeks, trying to keep a disease known as pink-eye from spreading throughout the range. Several cows had gone blind in both eyes, necessitating expert handling in driving them in to the home corral where patient treatment would restore their sight. A few animals had been lost—starved to death for water before the boys found them—and the beef steers were losing weight steadily. Consequently, in desperation, Brick had decided to vaccinate and treat the entire herd.

It was into this busy season that Miss Elizabeth Emory had dropped with the nerve-wracking suddenness of a stormy night stampede. The boys had promptly dubbed her "Boots" because of the extravagant footgear she adopted.

"Why, my Lord," said the tow-headed, bow-legged Monty, "if I was to climb on a bronc in boots as noisy as them, I'd get piled right on m' Sunday hat."

Brick regarded her as a "danged med-

dlin' female" although, true to his word, he was trying doggedly to teach her the rudiments of the cow business. He had quit, however, trying to hang onto his temper while he did it.

He was still cussing intermittently when he ran the roan steer into the bunch of yearlings the other three boys had held up in a corner of the fence.

"Where's the Little Boss?" inquired the diminutive Willie, a devilish glint in his brown eyes. "Don't tell me she got lost ag'in."

Brick flashed him an exasperated glance as he dismounted to straighten his saddle blankets, but he didn't answer.

"When a girl's as pretty as she is," Monty declared soberly, "she don't need to have a sense of direction."

Hackamore, who was older than the others and more impervious to feminine beauty, drawled lazily, "It ain't necessary, mebbe, but it shore would help."

Brick ignored their remarks, swinging back to his saddle and reaching for his rope. "Let's pen this outfit."

THEY eased the yearlings out of the corner and turned them down the fence toward the spacious corrals surrounding Bull Tank. Brick hoped fervently that Miss Boots Emory would not show up until the cattle were safely inside the corral. Twice already she had ridden innocently in front of a moving herd, turning them back from the gate the boys were trying to put them through. Women, he decided, made short work of tempers and long work of the cow business.

The yearlings lined out down the fence at a run, Brick and Hackamore riding swing while Monty and Willie romped on the drags. When the corral gate yawned before them, the leaders tried to turn back; but only for a moment did the herd mill. The boys lit into them with swinging ropes and high-pitched yells, and soon the spooky yearlings were dodging and shuffling through the heavy gate.

Automatically Brick reached for tobacco as he looked over the bunch they had gathered.

Monty threw a bowed leg over his pommel, glanced sidelong at Brick and inquired casually, "What happened to the lady?"

"Nothing," said a crisp voice, and Boots Emory rode her sorrel calmly up to the fence.

Brick ignored her, although he noticed the other boys covertly eyeing her, slyly figuring out what had happened. Finally Willie, wearing his best poker expression, commented innocently, "Sure a dusty country, ain't it?"

Brick smothered a grin and turned his attention back to the cattle. As he watched, a line-backed short-yearling wandered out of the bunch and stopped near the fence. Instantly Brick reined King in closer, peering at the animal intently.

"Hey, boys." His voice was suddenly tight. "Ever see this calf before?"

"That outfit?" Hackamore edged his horse in closer. "Shore. Belongs to that old muley cow that hangs out up in Brady. The one that always goes on the fight when she calves."

"Sure, that's him," agreed Monty. "Well, what d'you know? We saw that cow two, three weeks ago, remember? We figured she'd lost her calf."

"Kinda looks like she did," Brick said dryly, his narrowed glance sliding to the girl. "Take a look at the brand on him."

A muttering of muffled curses rose from the boys as they obeyed his command. Boots leaned from her saddle, peering through the bars, but finally shook her head.

"I can't read it. Is that one of our animals?"

"Yeah, it's our animal," Brick said with quiet scorn, "but it happens to be wearin' Bechtol's Circle B brand. Kinda funny, don't you think?"

"Funny?" she echoed blankly. "What do you mean?"

Brick suddenly grinned. With a man-sized excuse to go on the warpath, he felt better than he had for two weeks. "Your friend Bechtol," he said with amusement, "helped himself to a Wheel calf, looks like. I figured he was doin' it, but I was never sure before."

Boots stared at him in bewilderment. "There must be some mistake."

"Ye-a-ah, there's a mistake, all right. Bechtol made it."

"But how can you be sure? Cattle all look alike."

"Hell they do!" Willie flushed violently

at the look she gave him, but he didn't back up. "Scuse me, ma'am, but critters're just as different as people."

"A cowpuncher," Hackamore explained, "don't usually forget a cow he's had to handle. I doctored that little feller for worms once."

Brick added, mildly sarcastic, "If you're gonna be a cowpoke, you got to learn to read sign. Don't just look at somethin'. See it. I know that calf, Miss Emory. I can show you his mother. Looks just like him."

"You mean you're accusing Mr. Bechtol of stealing?" Boots' voice was strained, her tone defensive.

An unreasoning anger turned Brick hot. Why should she defend a petty thief when the evidence was right before her? He merely stared at her, his eyes glinting dangerously, while her face turned a dull crimson.

"I don't believe it!" she burst out finally. "You're just trying to get even for what Wayne said. You wouldn't dare call him a thief to his face!"

"Wouldn't I?" Brick laughed recklessly.

"Well, boss," Monty put in dryly, "Bechtol's face is comin' right here. Let's see."

Brick whirled, bringing King around in a swift pivot, feeling the surge of keen anticipation as he watched Wayne Bechtol ride slowly up to the group. Bechtol sat tall in his saddle, a slenderly graceful man with a flashing smile that did not match the steely light in his pale blue eyes. Looking at him now, Brick was reminded of a remark Hackamore had made about these eyes: "Like a snakey bronc. Never looks

right at you. He just looks past you."

"Good morning, Miss Emory," Bechtol said pleasantly, touching his hat. "Howdy, boys."

"We were just discussin' you," Brick drawled coolly, ignoring the greeting. "You oughta shorten your rope, Bechtol. Your loop's draggin'."

Bechtol's eyes narrowed, and his pleasant smile faded. "Meaning?"

"You're gettin' careless, cowboy. You oughta tell your boys to lay off line-backed, spotted critters that are easy to recognize."

"Get to the point, Stevens!"

"Sure." Brick jerked his head back toward the corral without taking his eyes off Bechtol's face. "Wheel calf in here wearin' a Circle B brand. How do you account for it?"

"I don't," Bechtol snapped, moving his horse up to look at the animal in question. He turned to Brick coldly. "I suppose you can prove that steer is yours?"

"We don't have to prove what we know, Bechtol. I've thought for a long time your calf crop was kinda heavy. You damn two-bit calf rustler!"

Boots Emory gasped. Bechtol's face turned pasty white and his lips drew back in a thin snarl. Then his right hand darted up under his jacket toward a shoulder holster.

BRICK was not packing a gun, but he was riding the best cutting horse on the Wheel ranch. He touched spurs to King, and lunged forward against the shoulder of Bechtol's horse. As the gun came into sight, Brick grabbed for Bechtol's wrist with a steel-fingered hand.

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Bechtol tried to rein away; but King, sensitive and quick, whirled with the other horse, shouldering him, crowding him back against the fence. With a wrenching twist Brick tore the gun from Bechtol's grasp as Monty leaped off his horse to pick it up.

Then Brick turned his wolf loose. Two weeks worth of accumulated fury pulled him up in the stirrups and, holding Bechtol's shirt in his left hand, he smashed his right into the man's face. Bechtol's horse shied away, but King swung with him while Brick drove another blow that knocked Bechtol out of the saddle. Brick dove off his horse to continue the fight, but the Circle B owner had struck the side of the corral on his way down and now lay motionless.

"Hell!" Brick grunted in savage disappointment. "I was just gettin' started." He stood glaring down at Bechtol, flexing his right hand, the knuckles of which were torn and bleeding.

"Well!"

Brick whirled at the exclamation, to find that Boots' eyes were fairly blazing at him.

"That was a clever thing to do!"

"Well, for hell's sake!" Brick's jaw dropped in genuine amazement. "It was better than gettin' shot, wasn't it? At least from my point of view." He heard Bechtol stirring behind him, but he continued staring at the girl, wondering just what she had expected of him.

"You may find, Mr. Stevens," she said coldly, "that your point of view doesn't interest many people around here."

"Ye-a-ah?" In vain Brick tried to check the temper this girl invariably aroused in him. "What you leadin' up to now?"

"Come up to the office tonight," she retorted curtly. "You'll find out." Whirling her horse, she rammed home the spurs and raised a twirling cloud of dust on the trail to the ranch headquarters.

For a moment Brick just stood there, staring after her. That she was going to fire him he had no doubt, and he experienced an unaccountable empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. But it did not mitigate his anger in the least.

"I will be damned," muttered Willie, completely flabbergasted. "I jus' will.

What's a man s'posed to do when somebody throws a gun on him, I'd like to know?"

"Anything can happen," declared Hackamore morosely, "when you're workin' for a woman."

"Repeat that, will you?" asked Willie soberly. "I like the way it sounds."

"Well, anyway," grunted Monty, "it looks to me like Bechtol's face got more than just told."

With tight restraint, Brick turned. Bechtol was sitting up against the corral, holding a handkerchief to his bleeding nose, a murderous glint in the pale eyes he bent on the Wheel foreman.

"You don't need to hold that fence up any longer," Brick told him coldly. "There's your horse and there's lots of country around here. What are you waitin' for?"

Holding to the fence, Bechtol lurched to his feet and stumbled toward his horse. When he had climbed into the saddle, he looked back. "You don't think this is settled, do you, Stevens?"

"I shore hope not, cowboy." A bleak grin eased across Brick's face. "I'll try to be packin' a gun next time."

As Bechtol rode away, holding his horse to a walk, Hackamore squinted thoughtfully after him. Finally he spat, shifted his cud, and said, "I jus' wonder. That snake's too crooked to even fall honest in love. What's he after?"

"Ain't that girl enough?" Willie demanded. "Them eyes of hers hit a man like three drinks of whiskey."

"Three drinks?" snorted Monty indignantly. "What kinda sody pop you been imbibin'?"

Brick wheeled abruptly toward the corral. "Let's get this herd doctored, boys. You may be workin' without a foreman tomorrow."

With little difficulty they shoved the cattle into a smaller corral leading to a long narrow chute. Then they began the arduous task of prodding the yearlings into the chute, vaccinating them, treating their eyes, turning them out, only to prod in another bunch. It was hard work but it did not require any great amount of concentration, and Brick found himself studying Hackamore's provocative question. He thought he knew the answer,

and he didn't like it—not one little bit.

Wayne Bechtol had apparently decided that acquiring Wheel ranch cow by cow was too slow, so he was now going after the whole thing in one chunk. Perhaps it was this very thing that Dave Emory had hoped to guard against when he asked Brick to stay on as foreman.

Brick felt sure, given time, he could convince the "mule-headed filly" that Wayne Bechtol was as crooked as a first-class pretzel; but time was growing short.

IT WAS after dark when the boys reached headquarters. Brick ate a hurried meal and then headed for the ranch house, where light showed dully through the drawn shades of the office windows. The rest of the rambling adobe house was dark.

Brick tossed away his cigarette and unconsciously squared his shoulders as he knocked on the office door. A muffled voice answered, and he shoved into the tidy little room, expecting to see Boots behind the big desk. She was not there. He swung the door shut behind him and had started to turn when a numbing blow landed on his head. He had a brief sensation of falling. . . .

Some time later he became aware of movement, which he dully wished would stop. His head ached sickeningly. Then he heard a strange voice. "I shore hope I didn't hit him too hard."

"Don't matter." A man laughed, and Brick recognized Bechtol's voice. "He don't have to be conscious for this show."

The sound of Bechtol's voice jarred Brick into full consciousness. Quickly, then, he realized that he was tied in the saddle on a moving horse—King. He felt a dragging weight around his waist that hadn't been there when he approached the ranch house. It was a gunbelt, apparently strapped on him after he was unconscious. What the hell?

Brick made no effort to straighten up but allowed himself to roll limply with the horse, hoping to find out what was going on. They passed a small pool of muddy water, dipped into a rocky wash and climbed out again; and Brick knew they were on the trail to the cabin in Murky Canyon, about four miles above the ranch. The moonlight was brilliant, mak-

ing grotesque shadows of the rocks and brush along the trail. Brick wondered, with a startling cold pang, where Boots was.

Then Bechtol's voice cut in again. "Did you put it across, Tim?"

"Sure did," Tim answered smugly. "She thinks I'm Stevens all right."

"She does, huh?"

"Yeah. These clothes of his fit me perfect. I wore a mask, but it wasn't necessary. I got her in a dark hall and she never got a look at me in the light."

"Good," Brechtol grunted. "What did you tell her?"

"I told her I'd figured on getting the ranch until she showed up, but now I'd settle for her."

"What'd she say?"

"She got mad, first off. Fired me." The man laughed with harsh amusement, and Brick smothered a curse. "Then she offered to buy me off. I told her nothin' doin'. As soon as I went back after the money in the safe, she and I were leavin' the country. She's scared stiff."

Bechtol laughed grimly. "Then as soon as I kill Brick Stevens in order to rescue her, I'll be a hero sure enough."

"Sure will. I left her tied up in the cabin, scared of the dark. She's shore goin' to be grateful to the man who gets her out of this mess."

"You bet she will, and I'll see to it that we're married before she has a chance to get over bein' grateful. I could have won her eventually by playin' it slow, but this damn road runner wouldn't tend to his own business."

"Well, his business will get tended to tonight."

The men both laughed. Then a narrowing of the trail necessitated riding single file and conversation ceased.

Brick Stevens was in a cold sweat. He felt weak and nauseated, although his head was perfectly clear. Cautiously, he tried the ropes binding his wrists to the saddle horn but they wouldn't yield, and he finally gave up the silent struggle. His only hope, then, was to continue feigning unconsciousness. Maybe they would untie him. . . .

They clattered down the rock strewn trail into Murky Canyon and pulled to a halt a hundred yards below the cabin. The

men rode back to Brick and one of them grabbed his shoulder, shaking him roughly.

"Stevens, are you awake?" Bechtol called softly. He shook Brick again. "Guess not. Well, maybe it's just as well. Now listen, Tim." He turned to the other rider. "You go on back to the cabin and act like you're gettin' ready to pull out. When you hear me ride up, you come outside to see what's wrong. Then sneak over here and help me. Savvy?"

"Shore, I savvy. Where's my other five hundred?"

"Right here. We'll fire Stevens' gun once to make it look good for the sheriff. Then I'll dump him off his horse and put a slug in him. My story is that I went to call on the girl, saw Stevens sneakin' away from the ranch and trailed him because he acted suspicious. When I got here and called to him, he took a shot at me. That's just in case you ever get asked, but you slope out of the country and stay out of it. You got it?"

"Shore, I got it. You'll never see me again after tonight."

"All right, go ahead. And don't untie that girl. That's a little job I want to do myself."

As Tim rode away, Bechtol lifted Brick's gun from his holster and shoved it into his own waistband. "I only wish, Mr. Brick Stevens," he muttered harshly, "that you were awake to enjoy this. It would give me more pleasure."

Brick hardly heard him, so busy was he trying to control his labored breathing which he was afraid would give him away. If Bechtol didn't untie him very soon, it would be too late.

They were moving forward again, slowly and cautiously. When they reached the edge of the clearing before the small cabin, Bechtol pulled up. Brick heard his saddle creak as the Circle B owner swung to the ground, heard the crunch of his boots as he came back. Sweat stood out on Brick's tight face, but he forced his muscles to remain relaxed.

Bechtol shook him again. Then, apparently satisfied, he cut the ropes holding Brick to the saddle and laid a heavy hand on his arm to pull him to the ground. It was then that Brick acted.

"King!" he hissed, at the same time

striking the horse sharply on the neck. King had been hit on the neck before, when he was failing to turn quickly enough with a cow. The sudden blow now brought him around in a lunging pivot that caught Bechtol flat-footed. The horse's shoulder slammed Bechtol in the chest, knocking him down, but King failed to regain his balance. His lifted forefeet snagged and he went down heavily, his right knee landing with a sickening crack on Bechtol's neck.

Brick was thrown clear, landing on his hands and knees in spiny brush. He lurched to his feet as King plunged away and Tim's voice cracked out sharply.

"What's up?"

Bechtol lay as he had fallen, his head twisted crazily on his broken neck, his body in the shadow of a catclaw bush. Tim rode up warily, apparently uncertain.

"What happened?" he called softly as he caught sight of Brick's shadow. "Everything all right?"

"Horse got away," mumbled Brick, striding toward Bechtol's body—and the gun lying clear in the moonlight. He had almost reached it when the light of the moon struck him full in the face.

"Hell!" In echo to Tim's frantic oath came the roar of his gun. Brick felt the breath of the bullet past his face as he swept up his own gun and fired twice, deliberately, at the target looming over him. A strangled curse broke from Tim's lips. Then, as he slumped forward, his horse shied out from under him and he came down heavily, dead before he hit the ground.

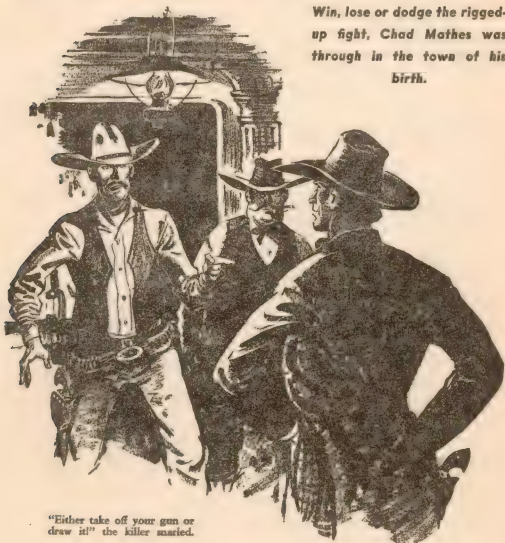
Slowly Brick straightened up, panting hoarsely, wiping his face with a dusty sleeve. Mechanically, he stuffed two fresh cartridges into his gun. Then he strode toward the cabin, realizing poignantly that he had no way of proving to Boots that he hadn't kidnapped her. He could take her back to the ranch, but he could never square himself.

He heard the girl's tight breathing as he entered the cabin, but he didn't speak. Fumbling in the dark, he located a lantern and touched a match to it. Then he turned to find Miss Boots Emory tied securely to a chair. She looked on the verge of collapse, face white, lips trembling.

(Please continue on page 96)

GUNHAWK'S REP

Win, lose or dodge the rigged-up fight, Chad Mathes was through in the town of his birth.



"Either take off your gun or draw it!" the killer snarled.



**By LLOID
JONES**

CAREFULLY Chad Mathes made his way through the Saturday crowd along the board walk of Multnah's one street. Beating against his brain was the pocket of silence that enveloped him, moved with him as he walked. A week ago today he had killed Mince Kane on this same street.

The silence was not exactly hostile.

Men said, "Hello, Chad," or, "Hi, Chad." Or at worst favored him with a short-weight nod. But that was all. No attempt to pass the time of day. No, "When yuh comin' out to look at them steers, Chad?" Only the silence, and the moving back to let him through, and the sharp word to stop the kids' staring after him, and after he had gone the quick taking up again of the ordinary pleasant hubbub of visiting.

In front of the bank Chad met Price Tolliver. "Howdy, Price," he said. "I'd like to buy them beef cattle, if you've got 'em gathered. Shall I come out Monday and make a bid?"

"Well," The tall rancher looked aside, apparently to spit at a bottle fly in the dust. "I don't know. I kinda thought I might ship myself this fall."

Chad said strainedly, "You always done business with my dad, Price."

"That's right," admitted Tolliver. He shifted his feet and couldn't seem to find anything more to say.

Chad said, though it sounded beside the point, "Mince Kane and Nug Haver sold me a couple loads of cattle. When I got 'em to Denver, I found out some of their Clover Leaf brands had been worked over from Lazy 8. When I got back and called 'em on it, Mince Kane named me seven kinds of a liar and told me to shut up and get out o' town. I killed him in fair fight."

"Yes," Price nodded. "I reckon you did."

"I figure," Chad went on doggedly, "this is Luke TenBusch's plan to get the cattle-buyn' business away from me. I think he put up the money to start Kane and Haver on the Clover Leaf, and since the Lazy 8 is a big syndicate outfit just over the pass and across the state line from 'em, the set-up could be made mighty profitable. Only a Mathes don't handle funny cattle."

"I expect that could be," allowed Tolliver. "You might be up against a pretty tough proposition for a young fella just gettin' started."

Chad got it, then. Tolliver—and the rest of the ordinary folks around Multnah—would wait to see how he handled himself. If Chad Mathes was building a business or a gun rep.

He left Tolliver without more palaver

and moved on, the watchful silence moving with him.

As he came to the Lead Bull saloon, a crowd surged out, blocking the walk, noisy and excited. At sight of Chad they fell suddenly to a strained hush. Finally someone spoke.

"There he is now."

Chad waited, noting the faces flushed with drink, danger warnings crawling along his spine.

"Don't pay no attention to him, Chad," a young cowhand cried then, his eyes snapping with excitement. "He's had a few drinks too many. Don't pay no attention to him."

Automatically Chad said, "Attention to who?"

"That gunman in there," said the puncher. "Var Whittleson."

"Never heard of him," Chad declared. But he knew, sickeningly, that didn't matter. This crowd wanted excitement. They would have it, baiting Chad as they would a pit dog until he had to fight or run.

"If he was sober," the fool yammered on, "Whittleson 'd never dast say you was a yella-bellied coyote a-skeered to fight a man who's got any gun-savvy."

Chad thought despairingly, *Will it always be like this now?* Aloud he said, "Mister, if you want some entertainment, whyn't you take a pasear over to Blanco? I hear they's an Injun showin' there can split the ace of spades four ways with a tomahawk, and his medicine only costs a dollar for the big bottle. Here."

Chad reached in his pocket, and at the movement of his gun hand the men shied like spooked critters. Helpless fury mounted in Chad, but he went ahead and brought out a coin.

"I'll even stake you to the price of the medicine," he told the cowboy, trying with his voice to make plain the joke of it.

His jaw fell slack when the puncher, scarlet-faced, grabbed the dollar, scuttled for the hitch-rack, and slammed onto a horse.

"Whyn't you order *Var Whittleson* outa town?" the fellow shrilled over his shoulder.

"Why, I wasn't—" Chad began, but his voice trailed off. The jigger was fogging it down the street riding his spurs. Chad let his wide shoulders sag helplessly.

If even his joshing was to be taken as a death threat now....

A voice from the saloon door said, "You better shut up about Old Man Mathes. Chad's standin' right outside here now."

Chad glanced up and saw a pair of eyes watching him over the bat-wings. Eyes that were a triumphant, hate-filled, steel-glint blue, and topped by an outsize black Stetson. Chat straightened as understanding came to him. This show was being staged by Luke TenBusch. TenBusch had him, and he knew it.

Win, lose, or dodge this rigged-up gun fight, Chad Mathes was through in Multnah. Win, and be a killer. Lose, and be dead. Dodge, and be a coward. Any way Chad took it, a wild young punk—no man to do business with.

The enterprise Chad's father had built up over a lifetime of hard work into a sturdy, honest, service would become a vicious, down-grinding tool of greed and thievery. Chad slowly looked over the gaping, expectant citizens of this town where he'd been born, and started for the door.

THE crowd inside fell back to left and right, leaving a wide space in front of him, empty except for one man. Chad moved into this impromptu arena with measured tread. Except for the memory of what he'd meant to be and stand for, Chad might have enjoyed, almost, the power and the glory.

The man before him was a stranger, but gun-slick was written all over his lath-thin figure, his sallow face, his curved arms and nervous hands. Beyond him and

to the left, Chad was aware of the heavy form of Luke TenBusch, smoking a cigar, a pleased half smile showing beneath the great black hat. To the right loomed the bull-shouldered shape of Nug Haver, partner of the man Chad had killed. Haver's shifty little eyes gleamed with fear and hate.

"My name's Mathes," Chad told the stranger evenly. "Did I understand you was lookin' for me?"

The gun-slick looked him up and down. "They didn't tell me you was a kid," he sneered thinly. "But I hear you got a notch on that hogleg you pack. Well, they's five notches on this cutter uh mine, and—"

"I always figure," Chad observed, "that's a sign a man's got a good sharp jackknife."

Hot and crawling as his insides were, he had yet time to feel a curious sympathy for this scrawny plug-ugly. Some day, if he lived through this day, Chad Mathes would be like him, no doubt. Doing the only work he could get—killing for hire.

Plainly, TenBusch and Haver had imported the man to gun for Chad Mathes. It wouldn't matter to them which one got the other. Killed or killer, Chad would no longer hinder their scheme for Nug Haver to rustle cattle, alter the brands, and sell through TenBusch. Off hand, Chad could see no flaw in their plan.

"Either take off that gun or draw it!" the killer was snarling in his nasal whine.

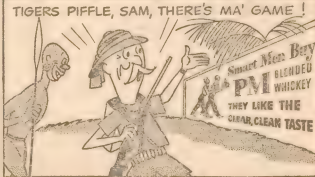
Chad had a sudden, crazy idea. What could he lose? "I reckon I don't know you," he told the gunnie.

"Name of Var Whittleston," the man rasped. "I'm takin' a half interest in the

WO'CHA LOOKIN' FOR THIS TIME, CUNN'L-TIGERS?



TIGERS PIFFLE, SAM, THERE'S MA' GAME!



NATIONAL DISTILLERS PRODUCTS CORPORATION, NEW YORK, N.Y. P.M. DE LUKE BLENDED WHISKEY. 86 PROOF. 70% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS

Clover Leaf spread." He was grinning. Understanding hit Chad, and he could hear it go through the crowd in a soft murmur.

"So you're takin' up Mince Kane's holdin's," Chad mused. "I killed him, a week ago today. Did you know that?"

"Make your play, damn you!"

Chad shook his head, folded his arms, held them tight to him against the raw tension of nerves quivering now with the faint ray of hope in the back of his mind.

"I don't know you," he repeated doggedly. "A good many of these folks saw for themselves last week that I could shoot. Nobody's I know of ever saw you so much as plug a tomato can. I wouldn't want to waste my talents on a bluffer."

"I'm tellin' you for the last time—"

"If you could *demonstrate* a little gun-savvy, now," Chad cut in, "we might do business. Let's see you spin around, make your draw, and shoot, say, the hat off Mr. TenBusch's head without hurtin' him or anybody else, before I can count three. That might convince me."

TenBusch's cigar went spinning, suddenly, and there was an abrupt scramble of bystanders. The killer's eyes had wavered, and Chad's dim ray of hope flared up brighter. Whittleson had to save face. Face was all that kept a gunman alive. He couldn't draw on Chad while his arms were folded. He couldn't let the question of his skill go unanswered.

"Ready?" Chad demanded, pressing his sliver of advantage. "One..."

Whittleson glanced left and right, licked his lips. He crouched. Out of the crowd a great fist lashed to the angle of Var Whittleson's jaw, and the gunslick slammed to the floor, skidding with the force of the blow.

Chad aimed his gun carefully as great-shouldered Nug Haver whirled on him.

"I'd just call off my bets now, if I was you, Nug," he advised tonelessly.

"What's goin' on in here?" demanded a voice from the door.

"Why, Sheriff," Chad answered, not taking his eyes from Haver, "this stranger was about to show me some shootin' tricks when Nug bashed him."

"Pick the stranger up, Haver," the sheriff ordered crisply, "and carry him down to the jail. That's where you'll both be stayin' over Sunday."

Chad leaned his back against the bar while relief washed through him like waves of nausea. He scarcely heard the foul stream of abuse that poured from Nug Haver's thick lips steadily until he was out of hearing. He did not hear at all the roll of deep, approving laughter that broke over the taut-nerved crowd.

"This calls for drinks all around," shouted another voice. "On me."

As the men surged to the bar, Chad caught a glimpse of Price Tolliver standing there at the end, grinning and waving them up. Chad pushed towards the outside.

He came face to face with Luke TenBusch. The big face had lost its usual florid color, and the heavy jowls looked flabby.

"You underhanded pup—" TenBusch began in a grinding undertone.

Then Price Tolliver moved between them and spoke quietly.

"You're lookin' peaked, Luke," he observed. "You're kinda new around here, and maybe don't understand how this climate might not agree with you. Especially now that Chad has showed up your play. If I was you, I'd look for a healthier spot, and take your men Haver and Whittleson along."

Tolliver took Chad's arm and they shoved through the batwings, down the board walk toward the bank.

"About that herd I'm sellin' you, son," the rancher said.

But Chad didn't hear what else he had to say. He was too busy, and too happy, passing the time of day and making friendly talk with all the folks they met on the way.

In the West hens were as rare as women. Consequently the West's enormous appetite for eggs had to be sated by importations from the East. "States' eggs," Westerners called them. "Easteners lay more eggs than we do," was the West's grudging admission. On no other score would the West recognize Eastern superiority.

J. W. Q.

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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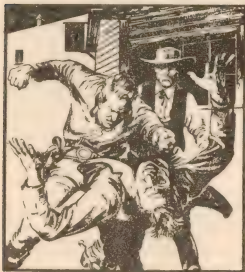
August 10th



Drifter Harl Menafee aided the getaway of outlaw Yoke from the hell-hole border town of Soltero. At the back door of the cantina they were joined by faro-queen Tara and a tinhorn gambler.



On the outskirts of Soltero—just as Tara explained that she needed a husband to regain her rich ranch—the Soltero posse caught up with them. . . . Yoke treacherously felled Harl and rode off with Tara.



While Yoke and Tara forted up at her O Slash T, Harl was propositioned by a town boss to root them out. But Harl didn't like the plans they had for Tara. . . . He started swinging his fists.



"No trigger tramp is going to marry me!" Tara warned Harl when he crashed through the guards of the O Slash T. . . . The complete story will be told in L. L. Foreman's novel—"Riders of the Gallows Trail."

RENEGADE GUNS

The *Missouri Queen* was carrying pretty Sanda Little straight into Slick Morgan's own black corner of hell—and Jesse Wilde, boot-tough hero of the frontier, was letting her go.



CHAPTER

Hades - Bound

1

It was like the braying of asses, the cackling of hens, and the screeching of apes—or humanity bent on making one last hellish show of itself. The *Missouri Queen* lay warped, that spring afternoon, to the long steamboat dock by the eastern bank of the river. Streaks of pale wood-smoke were lazily trailing from the old

boat's two tall funnels in the light breeze. Hand-trucks were still rattling, people pushing and milling, women twittering and squealing, children letting out wails, men yelling back and forth from boat to landing. And all this babbling and yowling was only useless delay; no one was getting anywhere despite the endless flutter and the noise.

Bound upriver from New Orleans to

at MASSACRE BEND

Novelette of the

Roaring River Country



"Buffalo!" yelled Booger.
"A stampede pourin'
straight down on us!"

By TOM ROAN

the Montana Indian Country, the *Missouri Queen* should have pulled away at noon. It was after three o'clock now. Her cargo deck was already jammed with bales, boxes and crates to the tops of her two long boilers. Here at Council Bluffs, more crates were being crowded aboard, and tons more were lying on the wharf like canvas-covered haystacks to wait for the next boat. The *Lady Wheeler* was due to arrive from down river some time

between the coming midnight and dawn.

On the passenger deck between the cabins and the elaborately scrolled rail, it was like sardines standing on their tails, still alive and frantically struggling to keep from being forced into cans. Everything was here: gentlemen in high stove-pipe hats and mutton-chopped sideburns, slouchy river rakes; ordinary cut-throats and swampland pirates from far down the Mississippi; gamblers and preachers and lawyers, the latter bound for wider and richer country to set up churches, jails and court houses now it was considered safe enough for God and law to come.

With them were both ladies and wenches, the former gentle-mannered creatures never far from home before. Caught in the push and crush here, some of them were whimpering. Others fainted from the heat and excitement, to go slumping to the deck in their voluminous petticoats and corsets while their startled escorts yelled for the smelling salts.

The other women had been everywhere, had seen everything and done a little of it all: anything from wrecking homes to rolling drunks or slipping home a length of steel in some poor dope's ribs. They were smarter and of a tougher stripe; mostly coarse-mouthed hussies all dressed up and painted like houses afire, and smelling to high heavens with perfumes, powders and sachets. They were a wild and fearless conglomeration.

"All visitors ashore! All visitors ashore!"

The call came through a yard-long megaphone from the rail of the open Texas deck. It swept down on the crowd, rolling out over the scattering and hurrying humanity on the landing and reaching up to the countless knots of spectators watching from the rim of the bluffs. Just after it came two long and mournful blasts from the whistles between the two tall stacks. Astern, the big red wheel was slowly beginning to turn, the boat quivering ever so gently as the engines were warmed up.

"All visitors ashore!"

There were hurried farewells and good-byes that should have been said more than three hours ago, here and there sobs and wails. Humanity stirred; men and women crowding, pushing, working their way to

the head of the wooden gangplanks.

It was almost deserted on the deck on the river side of the boat. A small, pale-haired girl in black leaned against the rail, her blue eyes looking startled each time she lifted her head and glanced around. Behind her paced a six-footer in beaded and fringed yellow buckskins. He was a burly-chested, broad-shouldered man with golden hair to his shoulders, a flowing blood-red strip of gauzy silk at his throat for a tie. He paced noiselessly in his Indian moccasins, like a nervous panther.

This man belonged nowhere among the lower country, or east of the Mississippi. Like other frontiersmen aboard he wore six-shooters out of sight under his buckskin shirt. A long fighting knife dangled down his chest; his eyes were so sharp and blue they seemed capable of cutting like daggers. He wore a small mustache and a short goatee. Here was a man who belonged in wider spaces; a bedfellow of mischief, damnation and danger, and more at home with them than in any other place.

Out of the corner of her eye the girl was watching him, curiously interested, yet afraid that he might stop and speak. She had seen him look at her several times, taking her in from head to heel with a cold and impersonal sweep, then apparently dismissing all thought of her as he looked up the river.

Now the slight vibration in the boat was growing. Gangplanks were beginning to slide, a hubbub of last-minute orders being yelled back and forth. In a few moments more the lines would be cast off, but something brought a sharp *clang!* of bells below.

SUDDENLY, as if bent on doing everything at the very last moment, two burly men rounded the forward end of the cabins. Mr. Landy Smith, the bald little steward was trailing them excitedly. Seeing them, the girl wheeled away from the rail and started to run toward the stern. Before she had gone four yards she had stumbled and run straight into the tall buckskinned man's arms.

"Don't let them take me ashore!" she screamed as he caught her. "I won't go back with them!"

"Wait." The buckskinned man's tone

was firm, strong hands cupping under her elbows. "You don't look like a criminal."

"She isn't," snapped the leading man of the approaching trio. He was a big, broad-shouldered, redfaced man with a short-clipped beard and a tall brown beaver. "If it happens to be any of your damned business, she is Miss Sandra Little. I'm Elbert Morgan, her step-brother. The gentleman behind me," he jerked his thumb at the second man, "is Andrew Gensang, her cousin. We are here to see that this little fool doesn't run off to the frontier on this damned old cattle boat. Sandra, come on. *Now!* I'm having the boat held, and we can't hold it much longer. Where's your baggage?"

"Never mind," gasped the girl. "I'm not going back to Kentucky with you and Andrew Gensang!"

"You're about to make it embarrassing, Sandra." Her dark-bearded cousin scowled. "Do we have to pick you up and carry you off?"

"The lady doesn't go unless she wants to go," cut in the buckskinned man. "I don't know what it's all about, but—"

"We didn't ask you to stick your damned face in this!" snarled the redhead. "Sandra, come here!" He advanced another step.

The girl darted behind the buckskinned man, her hands on his back, gripping at his shirt.

"Keep back, Morgan." The buckskinned man had thrust out his left arm, the heel of his hand catching the other man in the nose and mouth. There was a sudden shove, and the redhead was going backward, feet shooting under him and letting him land flat on the deck. "If the girl

doesn't want to leave this boat, by hell she's staying aboard!"

This was sudden trouble that called for guns or knives. Many of the passengers crowded up, sensing some kind of a drama. Others were appearing in passageways between the cabins, staring.

Out of nowhere appeared a tall old ghost of a man in buckskins tanned with red-oak bark—a one-eyed, hell-may-care old devil with a black square of felt over his empty right socket. Six-shooters slumped at his hips, and a dangerous knife swung like an angry bull's tail down his lean belly. He stopped beside the younger man, voice a dry cackle of contempt.

"'Twon't take a second to smack hell out of 'em an' fling 'em over the rail, Jesse."

"Hold it, Booger." The younger man put out his hand, stopping him. "If Mr. Smith can't handle it—"

"But—but I can, Mr. Wilde!" The little steward suddenly found his voice. "Come, gentlemen, *come!*" He put his hand on the dark-beard's shoulder and reached down to take the redhead's arm. "We can't tolerate any fighting on this boat. Think of the women and children."

"Damn your women and children!" The redhead was suddenly coming to his feet. "I take orders from no man living! I'll kill this damned hoodlum!"

"Keep back, Booger." Again the younger man's hand shot out. "I'll settle this."

He stepped forward. The redhead was already clawing for double-barreled little pistol riding in his broadcated vest. Before the hand could close on it, a fist caught him on the side of the jaw. Again his feet

This situation calls for

WILDROOT CREAM OIL



NON-ALCOHOLIC
Contains
LANOLIN



shot from under him, and he was down, his fine hat flying off, his body suddenly limp.

"Now get him away from here before I throw him overboard!" snapped the buckskinned man.

"Listen to 'im!" wailed the steward. "Damn it, man, that's Jesse Wilde and Bogger Bob Golightly! They'll kill you!"

Danger tingled in the air for the next few moments. Morgan and Gensang were no ordinary rowdies; they were rich and important men. Once back ashore, a few words from them might hold the boat at the landing and see a swarm of marshals coming aboard.

But there was no time to argue the point. Gensang whipped several wild looks up and down the runway. He saw four more buckskinned men lining up behind the one-eyed old ghost, all of them ugly and dirty and as mean as grizzly bears. He heard a low voice behind him, coming from a big, bull-chested trader down from somewhere off the Upper Missouri.

"Jesse Wilde. Why, hell, yes! Jesse'll kill both of 'em 'inself an' think no more about it than shootin' rattlers."

It decided Gensang. Glancing right and left, Gensang reached down and grabbed Morgan by the shoulders.

Morgan swore as they helped him up. "This is not the end of it. By hell, no! The man doesn't exist who can do this to Elbert Morgan and live. By hell, you'll be sorry too, Sandra! Help me, steward. You and your boat will see us again. Damn you, we'll follow you to hell and gone to get even!"

Men darted forward to help Smith and the black-beard. The redhead was as good as snatched up, half-dragged and half-carried away.

A mushrooming burst of noise in all directions, the whistles let their combined wails go floating up and down the river. And the *Missouri Queen* left the wharf, on her way now into the heart of the wild and lawless lands of the great frontier. . . .

IT SHOULD have marked the end of it. Death had stammered, halting just in time. In an instant it could have struck here, a man or two dropping in his tracks

like doomed cattle under a killer's maul.

Such things happened on these boats, sometimes as many as a half-dozen killings in a single run. Here was the rim of the great frontier. In most places the only law was that of the knife and the gun; in the rest, so flagrantly rotten only the weak and the scheming had any faith in it. The true plainsman and pioneer loathed the law and looked upon it as a game of parasites fattening themselves and their unscrupulous gangs on the blood of their fellows.

Angered now because his name and the name of Booger Bob Golightly had been blurted out in this crowd, Wilde glanced around. He wished he was to hell away from all of it. The crowd had grown alarmingly. Everybody had come crowding over to this side of the boat, whispering, brazenly staring at him and the girl. The girl still kept close to him as if to assure herself of safety.

Even here, men and women had heard of Jesse Wilde and Booger Bob Golightly. They were names that somehow seemed linked with all the rest of the wild characters of the far frontier. Suddenly Wilde turned and took the girl's arm, leading her away toward the stern.

"My baggage," she whispered. "It's back at the head of the boat where I dropped it."

"Then you have no accommodations?" He turned abruptly, heading back the other way. "I thought you had."

"There wasn't time." She was still hugging close, frightened and trying to avoid the staring eyes. "I slipped aboard in the crowd."

"Then we'll see Mr. Smith. How far are you going, Miss Little?"

"To Massacre Bend, on the Yellowstone."

"Massacre Bend!" He paused to stare at her, her heavy bags in his hands. "Do you know anybody at Massacre Bend?"

"Yes, of course. I have another step-brother there. David Morgan. He has a trading post. He's been kind to me. Would you know him?"

"Why—er—yeah." He swore under his breath. "That is, I've heard of him. Let's see about a berth, ma'am."

Landy Smith was back in his office just behind the gentlemen's salon, his blue uniform looking a little ruffled, excitement

still in his face as he stood behind his narrow, dark-wood counter.

"But I am just about to sell the last accommodation to Mr. Benjamin Purdy," he stammered, nodding to a short, duck-legged little man leaning on the counter.

"Maybe," frowned Wilde, "Mr. Purdy wouldn't mind sharing quarters with somebody else to accommodate a lady?"

"But I'm taking the deluxe, sir!" Purdy straightened, giving his waxed little mustaches a twist. "I always travel deluxe."

"It would be a favor to a lady, Mr. Purdy. We might make it worth your while."

"Money doesn't interest me, except in a large way, my friend." Purdy took a cigarette from a silver case. "Smoke? Those are ceegreets. Latest things from Turkey. Very stylish!"

"We were talking about accommodations to Massacre Bend." Jesse Wilde waved the cigarette case aside. "We have a lady here—"

"The lady," broke in Purdy, "could have waited for the next boat. The *Lady Wheeler's* due between midnight and dawn."

"Why argue with a jim-crack like that, Jesse?" Booger Bob Golightly had suddenly stepped into the doorway. "For a fourth of the fare he'll pay up here, I can take 'im down on the cargo deck an' he can ride just fine. There's plenty of room, 'specially back there next to a big pen of hawgs somebody's havin' shipped up-river."

"But I'm taking the deluxe!" cried Purdy. "I always do everything in style. I was here first, and first come—"

"Is first to help a lady," broke in Golightly. His one eye was an evil-glinting button, and his unsheathed knife in his hands, a gnarled thumb running gently along the keen blade. "Dammit, fella, do I have to take yuh by the neck to l'arn yuh some manners?"

"Why—why, no!" Purdy stared at the wicked blade. "I—I'm a sport!" He forced a laugh. "By all means, steward, let the lady have the deluxe."

"Yo'll get along right well on the frontier, Mr. Purdy," grinned Golightly, sheathing the knife. "Come along, Benny, an' I'll show yuh the hawgs. From now on yuh can just call me Bob. Damn chummy

I am, at times." He led the little man out.

It was the end of Purdy for the time, his complaints and future woes left up to Booger Bob and the half-wild gang below among the cargo.

CHAPTER

2

Ambush!

It was the end of the girl too, as far as Wilde was concerned. Some of the busy-body older women aboard would soon be telling her about him, and a lot of it would not be good.

Nearing thirty now, he had been out here on the frontier since he was seventeen. Trapper, trader, Indian fighter and Army scout, he was always where the smoke and the danger were the thickest. The last trip down the river on this very boat, he had had to kill a man in the gentlemen's salon—a crooked gambler caught red-handed and fool enough to try to shoot his way out.

For the past four years he had owned Bloody Bluffs, a trading post forty miles up the Yellowstone above Massacre Bend. Bloody Bluffs had not been his name for it. He had changed the name to Glory Bluffs right from the start, but no one would call it that. As Bloody Bluffs it had had its beginning under the slippery, ever-gory hands of a trader known as Blaze Keener, who ran guns and rum to the Indians until an enraged gang of settlers had hanged him to a rafter in his trade room. Come hell or high water, men everywhere still insisted on calling it by its original name.

This girl—if he knew anything at all about women—would not like to hear that Dave Morgan had been the man behind Blaze Keener. She would not like a lot of other things, once she learned more about Dave Morgan. His *Purple Lady*—with its limitless blood-lettings, its robberies, its honkatonk women and slick-handed gamblers—was a great, log-walled dive on the east rim of the river. It was a place to get a throat cut, or a bullet slammed into a man's back for a few dollars.

In order to keep his moves to avoid the girl from looking deliberate, Wilde spent the most of the next few days and eve-

nings in the gentlemen's gambling salon.

They were getting deeper and deeper into Indian country now. Many of the hills sloping down the water's edge were choked with timber—ideal places for lurking danger, for quick bullets or arrows ready to fly at any passing boat.

Something had come over Jesse Wilde. The quickest man aboard to see it was Booger Bob Golightly, but he kept his distance and tried to keep his mean old mouth shut. Jesse Wilde was no ladies' man. All hell knew that. But there was something about Jesse's cold-blooded manner in constantly avoiding the girl that roused the old man.

Golightly thought he understood everything about Jesse Wilde. They had been through fire, blood and hell together innumerable times in the past. The old man spoke his mind late one night when he managed to catch him alone on the stern of the Texas.

"Me an' yuh are gonna have some pow-wow right here an' now, Jesse," he growled. "It ain't like yuh to help somebody, then turn the cold shoulder on 'em an' freeze 'em to death. Yo've got ever'body on the whole damn boat talkin' 'bout yuh, an' I don't like it!"

"What in hell's bothering you, Booger?" Wilde looked at him with widened eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yo're a damn liar!" sneered the old man. "Yuh never was fool enough not to know. All the old wimmin know it an' see it. Damn yuh, Jesse, I say I *don't* like it. An' I'm just the ol' low-down sidewinder what can git up on my buzzin' rattler tail an' tell yuh to yore teeth about it—an' fight yuh here an' now!"

"It's the girl, then."

"Is that so?" Golightly sneered in his face now. "An' yuh just now diskiverin' it! Yuh never was too smart, but yuh ain't that dumb. 'Course it's the gal, yuh long-eared fool! The gal who's on her way to Massacre Bend, to Dave Morgan—Slick Morgan. Not a friend anywhere, and all the damn Morgans robbin' her out of even her birthright. She ain't seen Slick in seven long years. She don't know 'im now. But me an' yuh know. An' Jesse Wilde, of all the fools I ever rid with, givin' her the cold-shoulder.

"Look, Jesse." He tapped him on the chest. "Wherever yuh go she's followin' yuh with her eyes. An' ever' time she tries to get close to yuh, yuh hump off the other way like she's got a bad case of the mange. That gal's on the square. She's bound for a hell, an' yo're lettin' 'er go.

"At the best yuh can say, this damn frontier's a hell pit for any decent woman. She ain't no honkatonker. She's little, innocent, an', by hell, she needs a friend. If all these ol' wimmin keep talkin' to her an' tellin' her about Slick Morgan—well, there ain't but one thing left for a gal like that, an' that's to go over the rail an' down to bottom one of these dark, still nights. She's the kind who might do it, too. Now, damn yuh, do yuh get what I mean?"

As if answering him, a sudden frantic groaning of the *Missouri Queen's* whistles filled the night. For a few seconds neither Wilde nor Golightly could understand it. Then, with the whistles still raging and bells furiously clanging signals down in the engine room, they looked up a long, grassy slope and saw the danger coming. Men began to yell and women started to scream. In an instant it seemed that a panic had seized the boat from end to end.

"Buffalo!" groaned Booger Bob. "A stampede pourin' straight down on us! Look at 'em come! If they hit us square on they'll swamp us shore as hell. Some gang of mean damn Indians started this, Jesse."

"Indians! Indians! Indians!" wailed a woman below as if she had heard him. "They'll scalp us all!"

IT WAS a stampede of a herd to be counted by the tens of thousands. A black cloud of shuffling, rumbling, wall-eyed destruction stretched back over the rim of the slope. The beasts ran shoulder to shoulder, the lowered horns of those behind prodding those ahead. It was an all-jamming wave of headlong fear and madness sweeping down the slope and bound to crush anything before it.

A man could only guess that Indians had started it. There was trouble with the redskins everywhere out here these days, and less than a dozen wandering

bucks could have found the herd bunched for the night on some high benchland miles from the river. By swinging in behind it, waving their robes and yelling, they could have got it going toward the Missouri, timing it to meet the steamboat in the middle of a well-known buffalo crossing.

Up in the pilot house Captain Lem Bacon and Mr. Fuller, the mate, had seen the danger and pulled violently on the signal cords. The engines of the *Missouri Queen* were reversed, the wheel turning at full-speed, the water flying and the boat now backing downstream to get under the shelter of higher and steeper banks. Everybody hoped to let the herd go charging across above them. No riverman would dare to let his boat be caught in the middle of such a stampede if he could possibly avoid it.

"What is it?" Sandra Little, white-faced and scared, had come racing up to the Texas. "Indians?"

"Buffalo, Miss Little." Wilde was moving to the starboard rail. "Something stampeded the herd. We're backing out of danger."

"But somebody below keeps crying Indians!"

"I hear her." He laughed now, but he could feel the jar of heavy bodies striking against the boat below. There was a sudden noise of shots as the rough crowd opened fire to keep buffalo bulls and cows from piling atop of each other and coming aboard the cargo deck. "There are no Indians, and we'll soon be out of danger, I think. But it may take the rest of the night for that herd to cross."

"An' me, now," put in Golightly, "I've

never seen a boat sunk by the critters, though I have heard of 'em bein' pushed on a sandbar an' gettin' the wheels ripped outa 'em."

They stood there looking down from the runway between the officers' cabins and the rail, watching the unbroken black cloud sweep down the slope.

The quick work of the captain and the mate soon had the boat out of danger. Now the *Missouri Queen* was lying in mid-stream with the big stern wheel again turning forward to hold the boat in place and keep it from drifting back down the river on the current. Wilde tried to explain it.

"Something like this happens every so often. I know of one boat being held in the Dakotas for more than eleven hours while a single herd crossed the river just ahead of it. There was nothing to fear. This will pass in time, and we'll again be on our way."

"Yep, old story of the river." Golightly was gently but firmly crowding the girl with his elbow, easing her closer to Wilde. "Only thing what's liable to happen now is the *Lady Wheeler* catchin' up with us. She ain't far behind."

He stood there beside them for a few minutes longer, then eased away. Wilde and the girl were leaning side by side on the rail, her shoulder against his upper arm. If the damn' fool didn't know what to do now, he would never know.

Wilde said: "What he said about the *Lady Wheeler* is probably true. If it was not merely a boast on Andrew Gensang's part back in Council Bluffs, then that pair could be aboard."

"They will be." There was a little

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catch in her voice. "When my mother died four years ago, they had themselves appointed my legal guardians."

"I see." He frowned. "Money involved?"

"At the time, yes. My grandfather on mother's side left her Blossom Cove, about a thousand acres on the river that is to become mine when I'm twenty one. That'll be in December. There was money at the start. They took it all, the crops and the stock, and wanted me to sign over the land."

She turned and faced him closely. "Now you can tell me something. There has been talk aboard. What am I to expect at Massacre Bend? Is David Morgan what these old women are saying? What is the Purple Lady?"

"Ma'am, you want only the truth." He looked down into her eyes with the sternness of a whipping master. "Anything they've said of Slick Morgan won't be half enough. A decent woman wouldn't spit on him. The Purple Lady's the lowest dive on the frontier and—"

A rumbling, rolling bellow came from down the river, cutting him short. A big boat was just turning a bend, white water rolling in waves from her blunt bow. The sounds of her whistles came again, deep, rolling and challenging. The *Lady Wheeler* was catching up at last and wanting to pass them.

The whistles of the old *Missouri Queen* began to blow quick warning blasts.

REAL trouble was threatening both boats a few minutes later. Everybody knew Captain Bull McCoy, the big, red-faced, red-mouthed Irishman aboard the *Lady Wheeler*. McCoy was a man who would take any advantage, thick-headedly and arrogantly pushing his way in anywhere.

Whistles blasting, bells violently ringing aboard, the *Lady Wheeler* started to try to crowd on through and pass to the right. The whistles of the *Missouri Queen* were still sounding their warnings. Captain Lem Bacon had rushed to the stern rail of the Texas and was bellowing through a megaphone when men in the pilot house of the *Lady Wheeler* saw the danger. Then it was hell in the engine room. The *Lady Wheeler's* stern wheel

churned water as the boat backed away.

"Now lie there, damn you!" yelled Bacon. "You don't own the river!"

It was a wait now. The boats were lying two hundred yards apart, their rails filled with staring passengers, their lights gleaming.

Wilde was watching quietly. The girl was still close beside him. She gripped his arm when they both saw a small, flat-bottomed boat putting off from the port side of the *Lady Wheeler* with four men in it.

"That's Elbert and Andrew!"

"Let them come." There was a half-ugly little smile on Wilde's face now. "We'll handle them."

"Don't get into trouble because of me."

"I won't." The smile widened. "I just somehow have a habit of not being able to side-step trouble when I know it's coming looking for me. But if it is them, I doubt that they'll get past Booger Bob and that gang of toughs on the cargo deck."

They shifted themselves along the rail to watch the row boat heading for the port side of the *Missouri Queen*. Two husky men were at the long oars. When they were still sixty or seventy yards away, it was simple enough to recognize Gensang in the bow and Morgan in the stern. Wilde's face hardened.

"Morgan and Gensang have the gall of hogs."

"They've threatened in the past," she whispered tensely, "to go back to the same judge to have me declared an incompetent."

"Oh, sure!" He was standing very close beside her. "As an incorrigible delinquent or something like that. But out here you are on the frontier. We kill people for a damned sight less than that."

They waited, watching the boat come on. Soon it was swinging in under the gunwale. With the men who had been rowing it now holding it steady, Morgan and Gensang climbed aboard. They had no more than straightened up before Wilde heard old Booger Bob Golithly tie into them.

"Yuh fellas goin' sommers, are yuh?"

"We're looking for the captain of this damned boat," Morgan snarled the answer. "Get the hell out of the way!"

"Cap'n's got the chicken pox an' the mate the seven year itch." Golightly would be standing wide-legged with a grin on his face. "Lis'en, fella, wasn't yuh two damn turkey buzzards throwed off this boat once?"

"I want Captain Bacon!" Morgan was yelling now. "I'm a gentleman, and I won't stand here arguing with a damned old one-eyed fool like— Uh! Oh!"

Something had popped. Someone stumbled and went down. There was a shuffle of quick feet, the sound of another blow, and the sound of someone else falling, then a wild uproar of laughter. The figure of a man appeared a few seconds later, flung by the hands and feet out in mid-air, a loose, limp thing who missed the waiting boat entirely and landed flat on his back in the river.

"Mr. Morgan accounted for," nodded Wilde. "Mr. Gensang's next. Yes, there he goes!"

Gensang hit the water on his face and belly. The little boat shoved off rapidly. Gensang had come up quickly, and was caught by the coat tails and dragged back alongside. Morgan was up like a gasping, half-drowned bull and in tow a few moments later, and the little boat reeled off downstream on the sharp current.

The girl gasped, "Do they always do things like that out—out here in this country?"

"No, ma'am." Wilde was trying to keep from laughing. "Booger Bob and his crowd just happen to be in good humor tonight. Look, we're moving ahead again."

Captain Bacon had evidently sent his signals down through the speaking tube to the engine room. The big stern wheel was turning faster and faster, the *Missouri Queen* forging ahead. Hurrying to the bow, Wilde and the girl saw that the great buffalo herd was coming to an end except for little clouds of stragglers unable to keep the pace of the rest.

A great, angry-blaring blast and a rapid ringing of bells sounded from the *Lady Wheeler*. Somebody back there in the tall pilot house had seen what was happening. She was a longer, faster boat, and there was water wide enough here for them to pass. A soon as the rowboat was back alongside and Morgan and Gensang aboard, the *Lady Wheeler* had started

blowing for a passing—two long, long blows reaching for miles up and down the river.

Bacon swore in the *Missouri Queen's* pilot house. "Blow, damn you, blow! I know the rules of the road!"

It was a race now—firemen on the *Missouri Queen* crowding the steam gauges, the pop-off valves spouting. Everybody aboard each boat seemed to be still up. All lights were burning; people crowded the rails to watch the battle of the boats against the currents.

They kept it up until two hours before dawn. In wider water the *Lady Wheeler* forged ahead, her whistles savagely groaning. Shouts, gales of laughter and cat-calls came from the *Lady Wheeler*.

Ahead the water was deeper, growing narrow and swifter for six or seven miles. At either hand towering cliffs of rock stretched up. Danger was here, the currents tricky. A boat was liable to hit a submerged spur of rock and rip a hole in her bottom. Arrogantly, the *Lady Wheeler* plowed into it, her stern wheel kicking foam and spray like a waterfall, her whistles wailing, bells ringing—a wild song of victory clanging and rolling over the hills.

It was less than an hour later. The *Lady Wheeler* had disappeared around a bend. The *Missouri Queen's* engines were still pounding. They brought her around a bend and into the mouth of a mile-long narrow straight-away. Suddenly there was a bedlam of groans and yells. A voice bel-lowed:

"She's afire from bow to stern! The *Lady Wheeler's* afire!"

"Indians!" bawled another voice. "Lord, look at them cliffs ahead! There's thousands of 'em!"

There was no need to tell anyone what was happening. The sky over them had suddenly been filled with long, curving streaks of flame—burning arrows arching down on the *Missouri Queen*. The sound of gunfire and the yells of Indians filled the gray dawn light.

CHAPTER

3

The Devil Must Die

There were no thousands of the Indians, but there were two or three hun-

dred up there on either side of the river, protected by giant overhangs of rock. Cheyennes and Sioux would be the dominating factors, their ranks swelled by innumerable little bands from all the other tribes out here who were seeing more and more of their lands swallowed by the ever-coming settlers.

Throwing an arm around the girl and sweeping her off her feet, Wilde wheeled for the pilot house. As they ducked inside, Captain Bacon came stumbling out, yelling for hose lines to extinguish the flaming arrows as they landed on the Texas.

"Stay there." Wilde shoved the girl down between two big overstuffed chairs. "Don't get up."

Ike Fuller, the mate, was still at the wheel as if glued there, his eyes on the dangerous river and the flaming *Lady Wheeler* ahead. Wilde wheeled to the gun-lockers, raking down rifles and long-barreled old shotguns. The noise of guns below was already a raging hell. The bel-lowing voice of Booger Bob Golightly rose above it as he urged men to fight, and some of his rough-neck crowd were singing like drunken sailors, battle-mad in a matter of seconds.

The *Lady Wheeler* was fighting desperately ahead, with spurting flames of gunfire pouring from her decks. Here on the *Missouri Queen* it was like clock-work. Seasoned Indian fighters rushed up to the passenger deck to bully everybody inside, some coming on to the Texas to crash their way into the officers' cabins and start a wild-blazing hell opening up from there.

There was little that could be done beyond raining bullets and huge charges of buckshot along the rims. Wilde had just about emptied all the weapons in the pilot house when he looked around and saw the girl. She was on her feet now, her hands on the wheel, body swinging as she tried to keep the *Missouri Queen* in the middle of the river. Sprawled behind her lay the limp figure of the mate with an arrow in his right side.

"Go on fighting!" she screamed. "I've sailed little boats on the river back home."

"Go to it, then!" he yelled, spinning back to start reloading. "Somehow we'll go through."

It was all they could do, fight and keep fighting. A glance ahead showed the *Lady Wheeler* getting to the end of the straight-away and curving to her right around another bend. From the distance she looked like a solid sheet of flame now. Most of her gunfire had died out as men all over her turned their hands to fighting fire.

The same hell of screaming, yelling and wailing was here, but it seemed that everybody aboard the *Missouri Queen* had joined the fighting; women screaming as they fired anything that came to hand, men shouting and swearing.

Rounding the bend, they saw that the flaming, hard-hit *Lady Wheeler* had gone around a second bend. The girl was still at the wheel, throwing all her frail strength into it like an old-timer, eyes set on the river, apparently paying no attention whatever to the arrows and bullets stabbing and wailing against the pilot house.

They rounded the second bend, then a third, a fourth and a fifth. In places the girl swung the wheel violently, always watching for the smoother, deeper places. Around the fifth bend the *Lady Wheeler* loomed ahead, her flames looking like a towering inferno.

In spite of the plight of the *Lady Wheeler*, it was like rising from raging hell to a peaceful heaven—they were out of range. The river suddenly widened to what appeared to be an oval lake two miles long and half as wide. Here the banks were gentle slopes covered with buffalo grass, leaving no shelter at all for the attacking redskins. A wild cheering and cat-calling intended for the Indians lifted from the smoking *Missouri Queen*.

"Look ahead!" cried the girl. "The other boat!"

Wilde jumped to her, throwing his left arm around her and clamping a strong hand on the wheel. He had already seen what was happening. Aflame from one end to the other, the dying *Lady Wheeler* was plowing straight into the lower end of a long sandbar to save all the passengers she could in her last desperate minute of life.

IT HAD been a complete, all-out panic aboard the *Lady Wheeler* long before she had come to the sandbar. The roof

and sides of her pilot house were in flames. Many had jumped for their lives and were still struggling in the water; the *Missouri Queen* put off two small boats to try to pick them all up. As the flaming boat struck, it was a screaming, yelling, wailing hell. Hordes were pouring off the bow and jumping from either side of her. Terror was in absolute command, and it was every man, woman or child for himself.

Without the coming of the *Missouri Queen* with her strong hose lines and old but powerful pumps, the *Lady Wheeler* could not have helped burning to the waterline. Captain Bull McCoy and Hutch O'Toole, his mate, had been the first to give her up as an entire loss. They had also not been very far behind the first to jump onto the sandbar.

Stepping astride of his dead mate, Captain Bacon took the wheel, yanking down his signals to the engine room. Wilde and the girl hurried out on the Texas. The *Missouri Queen* edged in as closely as was safe on the upper side of the burning boat, and the spouting tons of water began to pour. The fight was slow and grim. Daylight came before the *Missouri Queen's* pumps were getting complete command of the situation.

The *Lady Wheeler* was a sad mess. Her pilot house and half the forward end of the passenger deck was gone. Cargo still smoked below; men with blistered hands and parts of their clothing burned away trying to get the bales and boxes dumped overside. Driving them to the work was the bullying Hutch O'Toole, ordering many boxes and stout cases thrown overboard because they were only smoking. Wilde and Golightly watched that work with deep curiosity, turning several times to look at each other.

With everybody on the *Missouri Queen* worn out from the excitement, Sandra Little finally slipped away to her stateroom and locked herself in for a couple of hours rest. Wilde and Booger Bill had ideas all of their own. They managed to get off onto the sandbar, then aboard the *Lady Wheeler*, where they headed at once for her cargo deck. When they came away their faces were grim.

When they were back aboard the Texas on the *Missouri Queen*, Booger said:

"Now we know a thing or two more, Jesse. Them Indians made a hell of a mistake. They didn't aim to hit that boat. This is the boat they was after. There's tons an' tons of Army rifles, ammunition an' supplies down on our cargo deck bound for Fort Benton, an' the Indians didn't want it to get through. But they hit the *Lady Wheeler*—an' her loaded to the guts with guns an' ammunition goin' to Slick Morgan. Slick's bound to be in a big trade to get all that stuff through to the redskins.

"And that," nodded Wilde, "is why Elbert Morgan and Gensang were so hellbent to see that Sandra Little didn't come upriver on this boat! They didn't want her killed when there's still a chance of getting more money out of her.

"Keep your mouth shut about everything, Booger. Let all that stuff aboard the *Lady Wheeler* go on through. There'll be enough of it yet to hang Slick Morgan. Come what will, the girl is going on through with me to Glory Bluffs."

"The hell she is!" Golightly's mouth flew open. "Just like that, huh?"

"Just like that," nodded Wilde. "Captain Bacon has the authority. With just you and a few more witnesses he can marry us quietly before we get to Massacre Bend."

The old man was grinning now. "I hoped it'd be somethin' like that. She'll be the best looker on the whole damn Yallerstone River!"

From the start they had been on the lookout for Elbert Morgan and Andrew Gensang. At last they saw them hidden on the sandbar beyond the burning *Lady Wheeler*.

Morgan's right arm was in a make-shift sling, the crown of his fine hat torn out, his clothes ripped and burned. The expression on his face was one of awe, uncertainty and blank wonder.

Gensang was worse, with a bloody bandage around his head that covered the most of the right side of it and his face. When the Indians attacked he had evidently been in his berth asleep. Bagged into the seat of a bulging pair of trousers was the long tail of a heavy red flannel nightgown.

"Damn purty, ain't they?" Booger Bob grinned. "Bet they wish they'd stayed at

home! What can Cap Bacon do 'bout the mess?"

"Drag it off the sandbar and take it in tow." Wilde straightened. "Bacon can't leave her here like that."

Three hours later again saw both boats on their way. The *Missouri Queen* had pulled the unfortunate boat off the sand, and the *Lady Wheeler* trailed two hundred feet astern on long, powerful lines. Aboard her it was both a hospital and a funeral barge. A young doctor and his wife who had been passengers were trying to attend the wounded, the dead lying on what was left of the Texas with strips of canvas covering the bodies.

Four men, a woman and two children were dead and eight people were wounded aboard the *Missouri Queen*. Among the wild bunch on the cargo deck there were six more slightly wounded, but those rough necks were doctoring themselves and wanting no help.

Morgan and Gensang were aboard the other boat, no more trouble until they were at least as far as Massacre Bend. Wilde and the girl were together all the time now, but the battle down the river had evidently made the busybodies forget them. Booger Bob merely kept an eye on the situation and his thoughts to himself.

They were like that until the *Missouri Queen* finally towed the *Lady Wheeler* into Massacre Bend five days later. Morgan and Gensang were the first ones ashore.

"An' now," growled Booger Bob, "we've come to our little bucket of blood, Jesse, an' it'll soon be time to drink. Slick Morgan runs this damn town, an' his brother an' his cousin have gone to him to report. Looks like we've soon got a general settlement comin' up."

IT LOOKED as if all Massacre Bend had turned out to watch the two boats come in. The *Missouri Queen* had taken care of the *Lady Wheeler* first, getting her secured, and then had to warp herself into a landing. Mobs and mobs of people watched, stringing down the stairway and asking hundreds of questions.

High above it all on a rear balcony of the Purple Lady stood a tall, large-waisted and beaver-hatted figure. It was Slick Morgan with the usual gang of pretty

women around him. He had appeared a couple of minutes too late to see Elbert Morgan and Andrew Gensang dash off the *Lady Wheeler* and go charging up the stairs, but before the *Missouri Queen* could finish docking, a man called to him and he hurried off.

There was little business here in Massacre Bend for Jesse Wilde, none at all for Golightly. But to think of not going ashore here, with everybody watching them and speculating, was galling. In a week it would be in every mouth up and down the river that this pair had been afraid.

Only a select few aboard knew what had quietly taken place in the pilot house late last night with old Captain Lem Bacon the master of the ceremony. Outside of the captain and the girl it had been a buckskinned group, cold-faced, deadly serious men standing there with their hats in their hands, six-shooters at their waistbands, knives swinging down their bellies. Awkwardly, they had shaken hands with Wilde and the girl, and had gone back to the cargo deck.

Now, an hour or so after Elbert Morgan and Andrew Gensang had left, Wilde stood in his stateroom with the girl in his arms. Her head was pillowed on his brawny chest, her cheeks wet with tears. His face was grim and cold, eyes amazingly blue.

"Don't go, Jesse," she whispered. "Jesse, I can't let you go!"

His arms tightened, his lips touched her hair. "I hate it as much as you do, but I've got to go. I'll come back. There's everything now to come back to."

"They'll kill you, Jesse!" she sobbed.

"Jesse." The low voice and a light tap had come from the door. "Seven of the boys have been on the bluffs sorter circulatin' with the crowds for quite a spell now. Others are stayin' aboard to keep an eye on this stateroom. It's time to go."

Wilde left a few moments later, quickly closing the door behind him to muffle the sound of sobs. Wearing new buckskins, his beard and hair trimmed, he was dressed for whatever lay ahead—the true plainsman prepared for the undertaker if it was to come to that.

As he came walking down the gangplank, the shadow-moving figure of old

Booger Bob Golightly was sixty or seventy feet behind him, sleepy looking, unconcerned, yet as alert as a fighting hawk.

Behind Booger Bob trailed Benny Purdy, his brown derby looking as if it had been sat upon, his swagger and strut gone from close association with the gang on the cargo deck. No one in the crowd seemed to know what he was doing there.

The story of the Indian fight down the river had gone the rounds. The dead and wounded had been taken off the boats. No great excitement remained from that. This tenseness had a meaning all of its own. There was an immediate opening and slithering back in the crowds as Wilde passed.

He was a man completely alone among crowds of people when he came to the head of the stairs. Massacre Bend was teeming with scouts, traders and trappers, and the eyes of all of them seemed to center on Wilde as he moved calmly on. He made an abrupt swing to his left in front of the Purple Lady, and walked inside.

THIS was drama, the kind the frontier knew, and all the frontier would hear of this. Here was no quick, startling jump-up of scared men. This was cool, slow, deliberate; a fighting man walking quietly into a cold-blooded killer's den. The chances were all against him, murder liable to roar down on him at any instant from the balcony across the rear end of the great, log-walled room. Under the balcony was the wire-caged gambling room, and gunmen lolled at either side of its tall screened gate. There were others inside to back the crooked play of the sharpers.

Men had been saying for five years that this would one day happen. All had expected it long before this, ever since Jesse Wilde had taken over Bloody Bluffs. No honest trader could settle down within forty miles of Slick Morgan and start taking business away from him.

"Where's Slick Morgan?" Wilde stopped at the center of the bar.

"Mr. Morgan's busy," a big bartender answered him.

Wilde turned and started across the room, heading for the stairway to the balcony. The silence was now breathless. Booger Bob Golightly had come easing in,

stopping at the bar near the doorway.

Wilde had not taken four paces before everybody heard a tell-tale sound—a poorly-guarded *click-clack* of moving metal. Instantly sounds like it were all over the room as if forty men were cocking their fighting weapons. A black-bearded buffalo hunter spoke, voice low but jarring all through the room.

"Jesse Wilde ain't exactly alone in this damn joint."

"Yuh said it, Sam." A tall old bull-whacker grinned at the lower end of the bar. "There'll be no shootin' in the back."



The roar of a shot shook the house. There was a ballooning little cloud of smoke around the lean old ghost of a figure that was Booger Bob Golightly. Across the room a short, bucktoothed little gunman lurched back in his chair and toppled to the floor, a cocked Colt sliding out of his hand. Elbows on the bar, Golightly had fired through his buckskin shirt from under his armpit.

The old man spoke: "Go ahead, Jesse. Some damn fools can't take a hint."

Wilde turned back to the big, round newel at the foot of the stairs, a six-shooter in each hand. A woman whimpered somewhere, the tenseness too stark and breath-taking for a scream. Now Wilde was going on up, as noiselessly as a shadow. On the balcony he dropped to his knees as shots roared right and left. A six-shooter blazing from either side, he saw two men plunge forward from behind a wall of heavy drapes.

It was straight on now to a wide door. A furious kick sent it flying open. Colt in either hand, he walked on in, icy blue eyes on Slick Morgan sitting behind a big mahogany desk. At Slick's right sat Elbert Morgan, to his left Andrew Gensang. Both were white-faced, and looked paralyzed in their big overstuffed chairs. They were the only three in the room. Wilde kicked the door closed behind him with his heel, and slowly holstered his weapons.

"Howdy, Slick. Guns are up as long as you keep those hands on the table. If you move them you'll die in that chair."

"What in the hell's the meaning of this, Jesse Wilde?"

"Sorry to surprise you, Slick." Wilde was grinning at him now. "I just came up to tell you that Captain Bacon and several others would like to see you down on the landing."

"You always were a damned fool, Wilde." Morgan laughed. "I know how you and your crowd have been playing the great hero stuff to our sister—"

"And I know," cut in Wilde, "how you three have been robbing her, taking her money and turning it into guns, powder and rum for the Indians."

"You're a dirty, lying dog, Jesse Wilde!" Morgan was suddenly on his feet. "You haven't an ounce of proof." His voice had become a screech. "I can have you shot down in *this room!*"

It was a call for murder, but Jesse Wilde gave him no chance to finish. Taking a step back, six-shooters flying again into his hands, he sent two quick shots crashing into each of the doors just as they were suddenly cracking open.

It was all noise and gunsmoke now. The roaring of the six-shooters seemed to shake the room. Shot before they could fling into action, two heavy-set men were plunging forward. Each had a sawed-down shotgun in his hands, weapons that would tear a man in half with their double-barreled blasts. Both weapons roared, their charges going wild, buckshot tearing a ragged hole in the ceiling. As the men fell, the door behind Wilde banged open. Into the opening lunged the tall figure of Booger Bob Golightly and a mob of buckskinned rakes.

Ears ringing from the heavy explosions, Wilde asked a quick question. "Where's Benny Purdy, Booger?"

"Right here, Mr. Wilde!" Purdy bobbed forward from behind Golightly. He laughed one of his scared pony nickers. "Mr. Morgan will remember me. He ran me out of Massacre Bend last fall!"

"That thing!" Slick Morgan was again finding his voice.

"Mister Purdy, Slick." Wilde reloaded his six-shooters casually. "Last spring his company shipped you two thousand old Army rifles and a couple of tons of cartridges supposedly to be sold to settlers out here. Benny's in the clear on that. He came in the fall to collect. You threw him out and he was sent back this spring, again going to try to collect. When he learned of the heavy shipment from another company coming in for you on the *Lady Wheeler*, Benny decided to have a straight talk with Booger Bob down on the cargo deck.

"Booger, I leave the rest to you." He turned his back on the three pale men gasping for breath there at the desk. More than a dozen cocked guns covered them from the muttering crowd that continued to press the stairway. "Make as little noise about it as you can. Benny," he took Purdy's arm, "you'd better come with me. Sometimes these wild crowds get out of hand. If anybody wants to know anything else from you, they can come down and talk to you on the boat."

In the hallway outside his stateroom, guards were still waiting. In a few moments they were gone, hurrying away to join the mobs in town doing a certain, grim little job of their own up there on the tall bluffs.

"It's all right, Sandra." He had entered the stateroom so quietly she had not heard him. With a wild cry she was on her feet, wheeling into his arms. "Let all that happens here be forever behind you. In a couple of hours more Captain Bacon will be taking us on up the Yellowstone."

"But what's all that noise?" she gasped when she was able to find her voice. "It's terrible!"

"Just Booger Bill and some of his lads. When they go on a spree—most anything is likely to happen."

THE END

★ ★ LAWDOG WITHOUT HORNS

By
ART
KERCHEVAL



"The fuse, Dallas! North wall—quick!"

BUCK MURPHY grew red and fumbled with his tight collar, straightening to survey himself in the hall mirror. For the three Murphys, this was a most important occasion, and for the youngest among them this was a milestone. Old Buck, in these last few hours of rare contentment, wasn't the iron-jawed man who had been sheriff of Blue Spruce, Colorado. He wasn't the bleak-eyed man who had half-promised

*Guns could roar and terror reign,
but ex-sheriff Murphy wasn't going
to miss his daughter's graduation.*

the new sheriff, young Dallas Dermody, that he'd side him when needed against the Lathrop bunch. He wasn't even wearing his guns. No, he was just another of the town's duded-up, grinning fathers, who aimed to fidget proudly near while his spunky Jennie Lee graduated from Blue Spruce's high school. . . .

"Oh, Dad, that simply won't do at all!"

He winced, for he knew what was coming. Turning slowly, he faced Jennie Lee, looking amazingly like a lady in this swishy, white, graduation dress that had set Buck back a heap of dinero. "Now, Jennie, you know I don't—"

"Dad, it won't hurt you to dress up once in a while! You can't go to nice places looking like a saddlebum. Let me fix that collar. Where's your tie?"

So he let her do it, realizing he ought to have moments like this, with his daughter fussing over him, more often.

"There, Dad, that looks better. Mom, come here quick. Don't you think your old husband looks positively handsome?"

Eva, whom the years still showered with favor, came and inspected. Her nod was decisive, while her eye twinkled. "Darned if I don't, Jennie. Buck Murphy, you sweep me off my feet. I'd almost marry you all over again."

Everybody laughed at that.

Buck, however, wasn't laughing when he reached for his hat and moved toward the door. By rights he ought to tell Dermody that he'd have to get along without him. Eight o'clock was going to find Buck mighty busy.

"Dad," Jennie said, "don't you go far now. You and Mom have got to be at the school by eight."

He pinched the natural rose of her cheeks. "Can't a man go down to the store and get himself a cigar? So all-fired anxious, ain't you, you get us all rigged up in our bib-and-tuckers an hour and a half ahead of time."

Then he was gone from their modest home on Blue Spruce's side street, walking down main street toward the sheriff's office.

It wasn't his sheriff's office any more. Buck wondered, just for one crazy instant, if he really did find satisfaction in the fact that he was free at last. Free from official duties. Then he shook off the feel-

ing that had prompted him to halfway promise young Dermody that he could count on him.

Blue Spruce was building up to trouble, quick trouble. He sensed it now in the tightness of the air, and he knew he must go home soon to his family and ignore this thing that was coming. To hell with Dallas Dermody.

He walked into the spick little office, which had somehow always been short of the touch of neatness when his own scuffed boots had been cocked up on the battered desk. Dallas Dermody brought his shiny ones down to the floor with a bang. The new youthful sheriff was grinning as he rose to full height.

"Buck! Gosh dang, I'm glad you're here. All duded up like you was goin' to a weddin', too!" He pulled Buck forward, whacking him warmly across the shoulder. "Get a load of this, Buck. I've started things rollin'. I've got Herman Sax in jail."

Buck whirled, staring toward the cell where he could see fat little Herman Sax, the county clerk and recorder, slumped on the cot.

"How come?"

"Been doin' a little investigatin', Buck," Dermody went on proudly, pulling out the makings now. "I aim to bust wide open Treece Lathrop's hoodwink game, and this's the first step."

Buck nodded. He understood. It ran through his mind suddenly how he had somewhat neglected bucking Treece Lathrop, neglected bringing things to a head because he, Buck, had been on the brink of retirement at the time and the days he'd had left to pack the star hadn't weighed too heavily on his conscience. He could, of course, have pried into matters and found out for himself the inner workings of that crooked set-up—could have, maybe, spared this reckless, flashy green-horn kid of a lawman from facing the lop-sided odds that must soon come.

"Well, it was time to force the show-down," Buck agreed thoughtfully. "If I know Sax, he'll talk when you get him in a courtroom."

"He's already opened up." Dermody took a musing drag on his cigarette. "Swears he's ready to turn state's evidence, if that'll give him a lighter hitch."

I've promised him all I could. 'Cordin' to Sax, Lathrop stands to make somethin' of a fortune off his Blue Spruce hoaxes, which we've known a long time, but not enough to sink our teeth into. Till now."

He made a smoke ring, went on: "Lathrop's had at one time or another almost a hundred holes in the ground, all around this Blue Spruce country. The good ones showin' paystreak you could count on the fingers of one hand. Most of them have been worthless holes, which he sold again and again to the Eastern suckers. Part of this you already savvy. But you don't know Sax got his cut for doctorin' the records in favor of Lathrop. I found that out, one night in the Golden Fleece, when whiskey loosened up the tongue of one of Lathrop's gunslicks."

Buck grunted. He could not deny to himself that his insides were squirming. "Lathrop's dander will be up some over this. You can bet your bottom buck he's plannin' a move right now to hit at you. He and his gang won't come tearin' in here. It'll be a smart play, when they do it, which means it won't be tonight with a Fleece, when whiskey loosened up the school-house. But somehow, just as quick as the sign is right for it, they aim to take out Mr. Sax. I don't think they'll let him live, with Sax ready to squawk. Dallas, it's too big a job for you to handle alone."

"That's right." It was Herman Sax's voice from the cell, trembling and whining. "Lathrop will kill me! You can't let him at me—you can't! Murphy, stay with the kid tonight, every night, till it's over! Keep Lathrop off me, and I'll tell everything before a judge, so help me!"

DERMODY, ignoring the outburst, tossed away his smoke. He came toward Buck. "What the hell you talkin' about, Buck Murphy?" His eyes were flinty. "What makes you think you know all the answers? Yeah, I know you sorta half-promised me once, in your most off moment, that you'd lend me some shootin' help with my first gun chore. But I never asked for it. So far, I haven't run into any snags, and I don't intend to. I'll remind you I've been packin' these sixes for a long time, even if I haven't been packin' a star."

Buck snapped it out, as he made toward the door: "Cocky, ain't you? That maybe

will or maybe won't help you in this business. For your information, fella, if I promised you anything, I musta et loco-weed for my breakfast!"

He slammed out of there then, glad to be shut of Dallas Dermody, for the time being. Not that they weren't good friends. Buck had liked the big young Texas waddy ever since he hit the country, in spite of the fact that he dressed too darn gaudy and his hair was too slicked-up.

There'd been the times, when Buck needed a special deputy, that he'd called on Dermody. The pair had shared tobacco papers on many a trail after cattle rustlers, with Dermody getting something of a reputation, but with Buck wondering how much of it was due to luck. Came the time, however, when the people, wanting young blood to wear the star, elected him sheriff. But for all his whipcord and raw-hide upbringing, Buck reckoned the kid needed guidance.

The old ex-sheriff drifted downstreet, the familiar street where he had triggered out rapid, raw, frontier justice so many times. That would never happen again. Thinking over these past few hours of ease and contentment, he was sure of it. He was through. His sixes were silenced forever. He had done his duty many years and had no more obligations to the people of the Blue Spruce. Whatever he owed in the way of moral responsibilities, now went fully to his own family circle.

Eva, he told himself as he drifted nearer the distant Golden Fleece Saloon, had every right to see him hunkered down to a quieter life from here on out, sharing the things they had always wanted to do together. Raise a little garden, maybe. Take it easy on the front porch of a Sunday afternoon. Buck reading the newspapers or just dozing while Eva sewed companionably near him. They still had a little money and maybe they could still buy the town harness shop from old Andy Clarendon. Buck wouldn't have to work too hard and they'd make enough to keep them the rest of their lives.

Jennie Lee, he decided, would get a heap of his time now. Gosh dang it, a growing girl needed her daddy—needed him around to kind-of talk man-to-woman with her. Too many years Buck had been too busy on danger trails to be really a pal to

his daughter. Now it would be different, at least until some young sprout came sparking and took all of her attention. Uh-huh, Buck would get out among their friends more, maybe dress up once in a while even if it made him feel like plain hell, like Jeanie had always wanted him to do. Tonight he'd let nothing interfere with his being present at her graduation. He told himself that firmly.

Nevertheless an old, old, automatic routine that he couldn't, or wouldn't break at the moment, pulled him inside the Golden Fleece Saloon. Here, Buck knew, Treece Lathrop and his gun-hung boys spent much of the latter part of each afternoon, when Lathrop wasn't in his upstairs office planning to take in new suckers.

Buck moved to the showcase, noting Lathrop and his three gunhawks lined up at the bar. One of them—Buck saw it was Axel Judd—appeared in an ugly, show-off mood, but Buck reminded himself abruptly he wasn't here for trouble. He was here because the saloon carried his favorite brand of cigars.

"Couple Havanas as usual, George."

The bartender waited on him, Buck paid him, vest-pocketed one cigar and stuck the other in his mouth.

"Say, Treece, it's the has-been!"

That was Axel Judd's voice. Axel Judd was Lathrop's right-hand man. Prodded by drink, he was casting caution to the high winds. The prospects of some immediate excitement, which Buck's mind couldn't quite grasp, seemed to be egging him on. Lathrop erred, he had felt more than once, in keeping this slow-thinking, gun-fast brute on his payroll.

Buck didn't turn now. But he could hear Judd sidling up, could also hear Lathrop's quick intake of breath.

"Sizin' up the layout for your young pal, eh, Murphy?" Judd rumbled. "My eaves-droppin' ear told me some things. Findin' it kind of hard, huh, to get sheriffin' out of your blood? We want to warn you. Don't back up Dermody."

A swift, sweeping sound came, then, of another man moving forward—followed by a resounding slap, and staggering steps backward. Crackling menace was in Lathrop's breathed tone. "You fool, Axel. Your mouth flaps open at the wrong times."

Judd's answer was surprised, incredulous. "Hell, boss, you said he might get hisself in our road! You said the way had to be clear—quick—"

Lathrop said harshly: "I told you I did all the brainwork in my outfit."

There was an instant's silence during which Buck heard Lathrop turning toward him.

"Seems, old-timer, my man got out of hand for a minute there. If I was you, I'd think nothing of it. We've never clashed, and I don't aim to now. Besides you're through rodding the law hereabouts, ain't that right? When you're up at the school tonight, give my regards to your youngun."

ONLY then did Buck turn, while blood hammered a little in his brain. He fought off a sudden urge to hurl himself at these impossible odds, snatch out a gun somewhere during the scuffle and start shooting, like he would have in the old days.

No—not so old, maybe. Five, ten days ago! He bit off the end of his cigar, and looked at this lean, wiry man whose personality had been painfully felt by many in Blue Spruce. Treece Lathrop could match a coiled rattler's deadliness, or he could muster a gambler's suavity, as he did now.

Standing wide-legged around him were his hired guns. Only Lathrop was never so crude as to call them that. "Faithful employees," he'd dubbed them, "in my many mining ventures." Axel Judd, squat bodied and cruel-eyed, seemed eager and waiting for his boss to say that joyous word, *Kill*. Short and dark, Spud O'Mears half-crouched in a belligerent bid for action. Tip Keller, yellow-haired, buck-toothed, shifted to an easier stance, chaw tucked in left cheek, hands lazing near his tied-down guns. The thought rushed at Buck that Sheriff Dermody didn't have a ghost of a chance.

"I didn't come in here huntin' trouble, Lathrop," Buck said evenly. He got his cigar to glowing. "I reckon I'll be goin'."

"That's horse sense," Lathrop nodded with quick approval.

Buck got out of there then, hoping his eagerness hadn't been tell-tale on his face. Axel Judd's whiskey-thickened voice had peeled back some of the uncertainty for

Buck, had revealed beyond a doubt that Lathrop intended to hit tonight. Not so much from what was said, but from what was left unsaid.

Allowing the lean, smug gold promoter the human element of blundering in retaining a man like Axel Judd, Buck knew in Lathrop's mind there was a vast storehouse of shrewdness, of intense preparedness that did not often spell defeat of his carefully-worked-out plans. Buck started out then, once more downstreet, all his resolutions scattering. Intending to reach the sheriff's office by a round about way, he was afire now with the aim of speedily warning Dermody and sticking with him, come what might.

"Dad!"

Buck halted sharply there on the street, adjusted his hat quickly. She was coming straight for him. In spite of the gathering dark, he could almost see the sparks in her eyes.

"Dad! How long does it take you to buy cigars? It's lucky you came out, or I'd have gone in there after you."

He removed his cigar with a snort, then sent it flipping into gravel, his mind in a rolling spin. "Sure, sure, Jennie." He swallowed with the sickness of sudden defeat. "I was just on my way. We'll go home and hitch up the team."

She stamped her foot. "You knew all the time, Dad, the class has to be there early," she said peevishly.

"We'll get you there soon enough," he assured her. He hoped he was hiding his gloomy hopelessness, his utter despair in now having failed Dallas Dermody. "Your old daddy won't let you down."

They went up the walk at almost a run, a slightly stooped father striking an even faster pace than his eager young daughter. Reaching home he got the well-kept family buggy ready in quick whirling minutes. He helped Jennie, with her long billowing skirt, into it. Now she wouldn't have to risk getting it dirty on the dusty half-mile to the school-house. He lashed speed out of the team and she had to hold on to keep from falling. He drove her close to the steps.

"Reckon Miz Smythe won't have too much of a conniption over you bein' a couple minutes late," he grinned. "Ma and me oughta be along directly."

"You better!" she warned pointedly. "Or off go your ears in your sleep." With that she was dashing up the steps.

He turned the team around savagely and headed back, wondering if he was already too late and Dermody was dead. A tightness crept through him. No sounds came from town, no alien rip of gunfire. But that wouldn't be Lathrop's way. Lathrop would play it tight and quiet, somehow. No one would suspect that he would make his move against Dermody and Sax tonight, what with most everyone within gunsmoke call at the school-house, but it wouldn't be the first time Lathrop had leaned on unexpectedness to get what he wanted. Buck almost marveled at this brain he must combat. He rounded a corner and was on the cross street.

He saw, then, a fleeting figure—yes it was Tip Keller—dart up the alley in the direction of the jail. Buck's lips set with ice-hard purpose. The men, he allowed, hadn't spotted him. The ex-sheriff pulled up, swearing at himself for not having a gun, and realizing now there wasn't time to go to the house for one. He was reaching the scene as things were ready to pop. Alighting, moving up the alley, in the wake of the man, he halted far enough back, eyes raking in the picture.

Dim moonlight showed the various shapes of men, Lathrop men. There was Keller, stopped on the near side of the darkened jail. He stooped, and a match flared. The corner of Mike Halloran's hardware store, directly across the alley, partially hid runty Spud O'Mears, who waited with gun in hand. Axel Judd crouched behind the trash barrel, weapon drawn. Treece Lathrop was nowhere to be seen. This was more of the man's cleverness. He could bolt, if things went wrong for the others. Yet Buck had a feeling that Lathrop was somewhere near.

Keller leaped up now, ran toward the high weeds of the vacant lot, between Buck, now, and the jail. Buck slipped closer, shooting a quick look at the sputtering fuse Keller had lit.

Wild fear for Dermody's safety tore at Buck. That stubborn, damned Dermody wouldn't budge from the building, even if he realized it would blow up. Buck went spiriting deep into the weed-patch, making toward the high sunflowers in the

middle where he had last seen Keller. He was wondering what to use as a weapon, when his toe kicked a rock. He had it in his hands as he eased nearer, hearing slight rustles among the weeds and at last a man's taut breathing. Now he saw the hunched shoulders, the broad back. He inched within reach. He lifted the rock.

It landed with a sodden whack on Keller's skull, crumpling him. Even as Keller hit the ground, bullets hunted for Buck Murphy. He flattened himself, edging through the weeds toward the trash barrel where Axel Judd crouched. While Buck worked slowly close, something of both hope and despair throbbed inside him. He wasn't entirely helpless. He had Keller's gun in his hand. But the minutes, the fuse-eating minutes, mocked him. . . .

JUDD saw him suddenly, there at the edge of the weeds, and his gun flamed at Buck, while he ripped out an oath. A twisting furrow of pain gashed Buck's shoulder at the same time he squeezed trigger, once, twice, three times. Crawling forward, fighting off nausea, he watched Judd drop his gun and follow it to the ground.

Blood ran down Buck's arm. He had to reach that fuse!

Only Spud O'Mears remained now, his slugs peppering the ground all around the crawling ex-lawman. Vaguely, now, Buck heard a door slam behind him, heard running feet. O'Mears blurred before him as he fired . . . and fired again. Missed . . . each time. Weakness washed over him, overwhelming waves of it.

Then, from some new direction, came more shots. Buck saw O'Mears melt slowly to the alley. Buck realized, then, that Dallas Dermody had taken chips.

With staggering effort, finally, still clinging to the gun, Buck got to his feet, stumbling toward the hazed shape of Dermody dashing toward him. He shook his dazed head knowing there was something he still had to do.

"The fuse, Dallas! North wall—quick—"

"Look out, Buck!"

Dermody shouted it, gun slashing up to fire past him. But Buck's momentarily roused, wheeling figure was in the way. Buck did his own shooting, slamming

death-lead into the lean middle of the man who had loomed up from nowhere.

Treece Lathrop folded up without a cry, there in front of him, without a chance to trigger his drawn Colt. Cleverness, in men of this stripe, was only a high form of stupidity. For the cleverness had backfired. . . . But Buck stopped thinking about it, as blackness swept down upon him.

He awoke in a foginess that only slowly started to thin and clear his surroundings. He was aware of hammering pain in his shoulder and a drumming voice in his ear.

"Take it easy, Buck," Doc Wharton was saying. "Dammit, man, even if it is a flesh wound, you got to rest. Why, it's only been ten minutes since you was out there trying to get hell shot out of you. Hey, dammit, what the—"

But Buck was already arising from the doctor's cot, snorting as Dallas Dermody rushed at him to steady him. "I was made tough!" he spat at Doc. "I'm gettin' out of here. Where's my shirt?"

He had to listen, however, as Doc made the most of it. "Way Dermody tells it, it was right-smart figgering on Lathrop's part, but like I say, what did it get him? You see, Buck, he thought he could make our new sheriff come to terms without a shot being fired. One of them gunslicks tosses a rock, with a note tied to it, through the window. Telling our stand-pat young lawman here all about some dynamite and a seven-foot fuse that burns a foot a minute. Seven minutes, for Dermody to make up his mind about Sax. Seven minutes, Buck, for you to start and finish an old-time smoke-out session. Giving Dermody his chance to reach that fuse—"

"Things is going to be different now, however, you old firehorse," Dermody was saying now, grinning his obvious relief at Buck's solid, and savage command of himself. "Meanin', old-timer, you're through totin' a star in Blue Spruce! Yeah, I reckon you got it all out of your system tonight. Me, I wouldn'ta made it, nohow, if you hadn't stuck in your seventy-five cents worth. From here on out, even if I ain't half the man you are, maybeso I can live up to my badge. Buck, ain't you willin' to do what your family wants you to do—quit?" Dermody glanced at his watch.

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The crew came running.



COME AN' GIT IT!

By WILL WATSON

**Cowhands jumped when the Cookie
bellowed—he was the orneriest gent
in the whole wild West.**

NINETY bucks a month an' found!" The kid horse-wrangler's eyes showed surprise. "You mean to tell me that cook—that sawed-off, o' nery gent—gets ninety bucks a month?"

"Them's his wages," a cowboy assured him.

"Us riders only get forty an' found an' that walrus-mustached gent gets ninety. That ain't fair."

"Don't agree with you," the cowboy told

the jingler. "The cook's got the toughest job in camp. He gets double a cowdog's wages because a good cook either makes or breaks a cow-camp. Time I was gettin' out on night-guard an' it's time you was hittin' your sougans."

After that, the horse-jingler kept careful watch of the cook, and he saw why the cook was paid more than a cowpuncher. He also became aware of something else; the cook did about twice as much work as the average cowboy.

The cook was out of his bedding before dawn and never rolled in between sougans until the sun had long been set. There was always a pot of coffee bubbling over the fire when the men rode in from their night-guards.

"He's the last man to bed at night," the jingler said, "an' the first man up come mornin'. He sure earns his dinero. Me, I get to sleep all night, 'cept when the stock is boogery an' the wagon-boss asks me to ride a night-trick."

Usually the cook got up around three in the morning. His first job was usually to check the dough to see if the bread would turn out all right. Then he mixed a bunch of biscuits and stripped meat—either bacon or dried beef—and put it on to fry.

Then he awakened the horse-wrangler. Wood was always a problem in a cow-camp. The fire in the rack, usually situated behind the mess wagon, was always burning, and thereby consumed quite a bit of fuel.

And getting this fuel was sometimes a serious problem. When the roundup wagon worked the foothills, there usually were trees to be used for firewood—pinons, cottonwoods, willows, junipers. And on the plains there would be the roots of sagebrush and greasewood to be used for stove-wood. Usually the horse-wrangler helped the cook rustle wood.

But out on the treeless plains, there were no roots of sagebrush or greasewood, there were no trees or shrubs to be cut down. In such a country the mess-wagon had a cowhide tied under it, letting the middle sag to make a big bag. And into this the cook tossed "buffalo chips" or "cow chips." These were dried droppings of cattle and buffalo and many times were referred to as "prairie coal."

These "chips," once thoroughly dried—and the summer sun dried them in a few weeks—made a good fuel. They burned slowly and with great heat. Many an old-timer living today has eaten many a round-up meal cooked by "chips."

Many times the wrangler would get his remuda on good grass where the broncs would graze without wanting to stray. Then he would drag wood into camp with his catch-rope. He'd rope sagebrush and pull it out and drag it into camp for fuel.

"Good work," the cook would grumble. But the wrangler would get the choice biscuits for his work and maybe a biscuit or two for his pet saddle-horse, for there was always a "biscuit-eater" in every cow-camp.

The tailgate of the mess-wagon dropped down to make a work-table for the cook. Here he mixed the dough, cut the meat, sharpened his knives, and did his work. A few paces back of the wagon would be the fire-pit with its grills and dutch-ovens and kettles. This was the cook's domain and no seasoned cowhand would enter it. No seasoned cowhand would accidentally risk being hit with boiling water.

"Give the cookie lots of room," was an adage around a roundup camp.

Most cooks were, to put it bluntly, ornery and mean. Many times the cook was a stoved-up cowpuncher who, due to some accident with horse, rope or gun, could not ride circles any longer. Therefore the ranch-owner would give him the chance to cook. Many times the broken-down puncher would rebel and leave the ranch. But to punch cows a man had to be well and be a good rider. So many of the broken-down punchers tied on a once-white apron and became one of those gents who holler, "Come an' get it or I'll throw it away!"

Usually cooks were hard-drinkers. They couldn't drink on the job, for nothing broke down the purpose of a roundup camp with the rapidity of whiskey. But let a cook hit town—Many a roundup wagon had come into the home-ranch with the cook sick and drunk in the back and with a cowpuncher handling the ribbons on the four-horse team.

ROUNDUP camps were changed every day or two. When the circle-riders had worked a particular section and

gathered all the steers in beef-roundup, or branded the spring-calves in spring roundup, then the wagons—bed-wagon and mess-wagon—would move on and make a new camp, usually around a spring or creek where water was plentiful for man and beast and where wood would be easier to get.

"Time to move camp today," the wagon-boss would order. "Make it over to Willow Springs on Bitter Crick. The jingler'll help you hook up, Cookie."

"T'hell with that smooth-faced kid! I kin run my own wagon!"

"All right, all right." The wagon-boss looked at the night hawk, who would drive the bed-wagon. "You know the trail over to Willow Springs?"

The cook cut in with, "That nighthawk don't need to wagon-guide me. I know this here range, Wagon-boss. I kin cut my own trail."

The wagon-boss grinned at the nighthawk. "Frosty ol' cuss." The wagon-boss turned his bronc over to where his crew awaited its day's instructions. The cook fell to putting his pots away.

Usually he had a tub filled with water. He immersed the pots into this to cool them. He had no leftovers. A good roundup cook never had leftovers to carry from one camp to another.

His pots and pans cooled and washed, he restored them to various places in his mess-wagon—some hung on the outside from hooks, others inside. His own bed-roll also went into the wagon.

During this time, the nighthawk was loading the bed-wagon with bedrolls. The wagon-broncs stood in the rope-corral. His wagon loaded to suit his taste, the cook then raised up the lid in the back that he used as a work-table.

"We'd best take this wood along," the nighthawk said.

He and the cook loaded the wood into the cowhide-bag under the mess-wagon. The last thing the cook did was to pour the tub of dirty water over the pit holding the burned-down fire. Prairie-fire was a terrible thing—almost as ruthless as a forest-fire—and the cook always made sure he'd start no prairie-fires. The hot coals hissed and steamed and the cook stirred them with a stick to make sure no spark of fire remained.

He and the nighthawk harnessed their teams. The nighthawk only used two broncs on his wagon but the mess-wagon, being rather heavy, drew a four-horse team. The broncs were spooky and they snorted as the harnesses hit them.

"They always give a man wild hosses," the cook grumbled.

Finally he had his broncs hitched, one team strung ahead of the other. While the cook went up on the high spring-seat, the nighthawk held the lead-team. The cook carefully adjusted the ribbons and all the while locked the brakes with his boot.

"Okay, Nighthawk."

The nighthawk then went back to his wagon, climbed up and took his lines. "Ready, Cookie."

The cook hollered, "Hit them collars, you sons!"



So, across the prairie, across the foothills, they went—bed-wagon following mess-wagon, with both cook and nighthawk laying back on their lines to hold their teams. Lurching, they went across the hills, following no trail, heading for their next camp ground where the others would join them later.

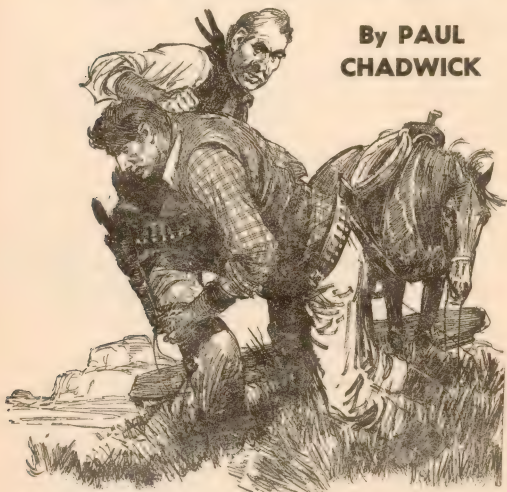
And the cook made sure his teams did not get a chance to run away. A runaway with a mess-wagon would be disastrous. Besides standing a chance of being killed when pitched from his high, swaying seat, there would be lots of other work entailed. During a runaway a mess-wagon was usually wrecked and pots and pans would be strewn for miles.

After a few miles, the hot sun slowed down the frisky teams, and the cook had to use his whip. He and the nighthawk reached their new camp by early afternoon. They unharnessed and turned their horses loose. The horse-wrangler, who had fol-

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CROSSED-O DOUBLE-CROSS

By **PAUL
CHADWICK**



He was still off balance when Neddick's fist crashed down.

When cowman Vic Colby added up seven poisoned heifers and one sneaky partner, he vowed Funeral Creek would run red with blood.

SUSPICION, dark and ugly, crowded its way into Vic Colby's mind the moment he saw the three dead heifers lying beside the bend of Funeral Creek.

They weren't a pretty sight, those yearlings. Their tongues glistened with dried blood and froth. Their bellies were bloated, their muscles rigid.

Colby slid off his bronc to get a closer view of them. When he saw his own brand on their flanks, the Crossed O that he and

Chet Neddick had registered in the State Brand Book, anger rose inside him till he almost choked. There were no bullet holes, no claw or tooth marks, nothing to show how they had died.

"Poison!" he thought.

He began looking around in trembling concentration. At the edge of a little gully where the earth was soft, he ran across the fresh footprints of a horse. Neddick's horse.

Colby's eyes got coldly bright. He climbed up stiffly into his saddle and touched rowels to his bronc. All the way back to the ranch house he chewed a twig of *escobilla*, nursing his growing anger till it burned white hot.

That night at supper, across the rough plank table, he found it hard to look at his partner. He watched Neddick as if he'd only just met him and were sizing him up. He waited for Neddick to say something about those three dead cows, waited with the tenseness of a young bobcat ready to spring. Neddick would have a job, he thought, talking his way out of this one.

But Neddick didn't mention the cattle. Small and grizzled, he had a round, smooth face, pink-cheeked like a baby. His expression was the same as always tonight, untroubled and content. He munched his food and sipped his coffee placidly. He and Colby had become partners because they both had a little money saved up and because Colby had youth and strength while Neddick had experience and savvy. They had figured they'd make a swell team.

Everything had gone well until Colby had started getting spooked at Neddick's air of superior knowledge. Almost anything that came up Neddick knew about, or pretended to. Cattle, horses, saddles, hunting—even the weather. Colby suspected now that there was more behind Neddick's smooth round face than he'd first figured.

The silence grew embarrassing. Colby looked up to find Neddick's blue eyes boring straight into his. There was a glint in them that might have been humor or might have been something else.

"Anythin' eatin' you, Vic?" asked Neddick.

"I just been thinkin'," Colby said.

"That's every man's right," Neddick told him philosophically.

But he laid a hand on Colby's shoulder

after they had got the dishes cleared off.

"Maybe you need a little change, Vic—a blow-out in town. You been stickin' pretty close to things for a month now. Every young feller needs some excitement."

"Tellin' me what to do again, ain't you, Chet?"

"Not tellin' you—just advisin' you."

"It amounts to the same thing," said Colby gruffly. "I'm gettin' fed up on it. An' there's some other things goin' on around here I'm fed up with, too."

He felt his voice getting thick, felt blood rushing into his face. He looked down into Neddick's bland, pink-cheeked features, and squeezed his hand into a fist. Then he dropped it, turned on his heel and walked out of the house without another word. They'd come to blows, or worse, if he stayed on, listening to Neddick's advice and thinking about those three dead cows.

He saddled up and rode off angrily into the darkness, heading for town and a certain little blonde by the name of Sibyl. Sibyl worked as a waitress.

She was just getting ready to go off duty when he arrived. She flashed an easy smile his way, then pouted becomingly.

"Long time no see, Mister Cowman," she said.

She turned away from Colby, undoing her apron, smoothing her shiny hair. Colby coaxed her into sharing a couple of beers with him. It didn't take much coaxing at that. She settled herself comfortably at a table with him as if she were going to light down for the night. As long as Colby fed her beers she'd listen. Her face had a prettiness that was as empty as the bubbles on her beer mug, and her sympathy was of about the same kind. She nodded knowingly when Colby, his tongue loosened, began telling her about his suspicions.

"There ain't no cattle disease in this part of the country right now, Sib," he said. "Chet better not start tellin' me there is."

"That's likely what he will tell you, Vic. I never did like that pard of yours. He won't even say 'hello' to a girl nice the way you do—and he's never bought me one beer yet. His purse is tied too tight with whang leather."

Her eyes opened wide and she trailed her fingers up through her shiny blonde hair.

"He likes money, Vic. And he thinks you're a greenhorn."

"How do you know that, Sib? Did he say so?"

"No, but a girl can tell. He's out to skin you."

"How do you mean?" Colby asked. He guessed just about what she was going to say, but he wanted to hear her say it.

Sibyl lowered her voice and leaned toward him.

"Maybe he's poisoning those cows and trying to make things look bad so he can buy you out cheap. Ever think of that, Mister Cattle King?"

Colby nodded, tight lipped. It was just what he had thought ever since he'd seen those dead cows. The seeds of suspicion had sent his mind flashing back to other little happenings, like the time Neddick had advised against spending money fixing up the ranch house for a while.

"That can wait," Neddick had said. "Don't know yet whether we'll make a go of it here. One or the other might get discouraged an' want to sell out. We'd better put our time an' cash into building up a herd."

Colby said good-by to Sibyl at the end of the tenth beer. When he got back to the home ranch, Neddick had gone to bed and was snoring.

ALL night Colby tossed in his bunk, bothered by nightmares of dead, potbellied cattle and of a partner who was trying to skin him. Along toward morning he fell into a deep, tired sleep.

Neddick was gone when he awoke. It angered Colby to think that his partner hadn't roused him. Maybe there was a reason for Neddick's pussy-footing. Usually he made a noise in the kitchen that would wake the dead.

Colby ate a few cold biscuits washed down with coffee, saddled up and took a pasear out on the range to see what was what. He followed the creek to the spot where he'd seen the dead cattle. They were still there naturally, though coyotes had been chewing at them in the night and overhead in the clear blue sky of day, buzzards were beginning to wheel.

Colby rode on and around a bend in the creek. A half mile up, he found more dead cows. Four this time. They had died in the night. Not only that, close to where they lay, he found the unmistakable fresh hoofmarks of Neddick's bronc. Colby's suspicions rose to a frenzied pitch.

He followed Neddick's tracks with grim purpose till he caught sight of him ahead around a rise, jogging along.

Even at that distance there was, it seemed to Colby, something snugly self-satisfied in the posture of his partner, something that grated on Colby's nerves like a file going over metal. Neddick figured he was sitting pretty. But was he?

He disappeared from view behind some brush, and ten minutes passed before Colby saw him again. This time Neddick had dismounted and was prowling along the creek edge mysteriously, his eyes turned groundward.

Colby raced his horse ahead, riding up in a lather and making Neddick start. He had been too preoccupied with whatever he was up to to hear Colby approach. While Colby stared at him, he slid something into his jacket pocket.

"Have a good time last night, Vic?" he said.

His words, drawling and slightly nasal, nettled Colby still more. It seemed to him that the older man was mocking him, taunting him for his youth and greenness.

Colby saw red.

"Those cows!" he said thickly. "What did you do to fix 'em up that way, Chet?"

"What cows you speakin' of, Vic?"

"You know damn well. Those cows that are only fit for buzzard bait right now—seven of our best ones."

"What did I do to 'em?"

"That's what I said. You been actin' mighty smart, Chet. But I ain't quite the fool you seem to think."

Colby had dismounted now. He came up close. Colby had to look down because Neddick was so much shorter. Despite that, Neddick somehow gave the impression of superior stature because his expression was so bland.

"Keep your shirt on, Vic," he said.

"You can't give me any more of your smart, know-it-all gab this time, Chet. I want to know how come you poisoned those critters."

Colby was so mad he hardly knew he had made a direct accusation till he saw the slow red creeping up Neddick's neck. But Neddick just stood there, looking at him.

"Well?" demanded Colby.

There was no answer. Colby suddenly struck out furiously, all his pent-up suspicion and irritation concentrated in a punch Neddick wouldn't forget.

Somehow, though, his long-arm blow missed fire. Neddick wasn't there when his fist reached home. He had ducked his round face and sidestepped, letting Colby hit empty air. Immediately afterward, while Colby was off-balance, Neddick bored in, going at it as systematically and methodically as he went about swinging his twine at a steer.

"Why you—" shouted Colby.

His own face wore a sneering look now. It seemed absurd that Neddick, years older and shorter, should attempt to fight him with bare fists.

Colby landed a glancing blow on the side of Neddick's bullet head and felt a moment of elation. The next instant it was jarred out of him and he saw bright stars. Something had struck the point of his jaw with a head-jolting thud. It was Neddick's fist, but it felt more like the butting end of a steer.

Colby's youth enabled him to stand up to it, but he was rocking on his feet, shaking his head to clear it. He moved more cautiously after that, shoulders hunched forward, waiting for the opportunity to throw the punch that would lay Neddick flat.

But it never came. Before Colby could unleash the right-arm punch again that would finish things, Neddick fainted with his left. Colby struck with all his strength—and missed. The force of his blow sent him forward. He was still off balance when Neddick's fist crashed down on the back of his head.

Colby didn't know when he hit the ground. He was out like a light.

WHEN he came to he was alone. He had never felt so completely alone in his life, or so defeated, frustrated and mad.

He got up, wobbling, glaring around for his partner. The cobwebs began to ease out of his brain, and his hand crept

toward the gun at his side in its thonged-down holster. He should have pulled it on Neddick instead of using his fists, he thought. Neddick was too sharp and tricky to fool with.

Before climbing into the saddle again, Colby did a little foot scouting and located the spot where Neddick had struck off over the range in a westerly direction.

That was the way Colby went when he got on his horse; west, with fury in his heart and with a grim determination to settle things once for all.

He topped a rise, looked down into a scrubby hollow filled with catclaw bushes and rocks. The bawling of excited cattle reached his ears. He saw Neddick riding fiercely, swinging his rope for a whip, trying to get a bunch of balky white-faces on the move to better ground.

Neddick apparently hadn't expected his partner to come to so quickly. He was staging a one-man roundup for reasons best known to himself, and he was laying himself wide open for trouble.

Colby, riding down hill, knew that he could get the drop on Neddick, take him prisoner or shoot him down. He had momentary qualms, hating somehow to think that it had come to this—gunsmoke instead of the profitable partnership they had visioned.

But it was Neddick's fault, not his. Neddick was asking for it, thinking he could put something over on a man he supposed was a greenhorn.

Colby shouted to give Neddick fair warning before he clawed for his gun. But Neddick didn't even hear him. The herds were making too much noise. One mean-tempered cow with spooked eyes and tossing horns turned and headed for a thick clump of brush. Her tail lashed in circles and her back humped like a jack-rabbit as Neddick raced after her.

Colby watched amazed. It was the first time he had ever seen Neddick angry enough to lose his self-possession. Neddick was swearing. He went after that cranky cow like a demon, shouting, spurring his bronc and trying to lay his twine on her before she reached the brush.

But the cow won out. She took a header into the catclaw clump, disregarding the thorns, but bellowing like a fool. Colby could watch her progress by her flying

tail. He saw Neddick go in after her, driving his reluctant horse to follow the swath of broken branch stems that the cow had made.

The horse obeyed for ten feet or so. Then suddenly it reared up high, whinnying. Colby glimpsed pawing hoofs, distended nostrils, red with terror. And he saw Neddick, taken unawares, thrown from the saddle sidewise. He saw him sail over the tops of the catclaw for a brief moment, then disappear.

An instant later the riderless horse came streaking out, whinnying shrilly, charging into the herd of cows, scattering them. Then horse and cattle rampaged away, leaving Colby to speculate as to what it was all about.

He discovered why it had happened soon enough.

Approaching the catclaw clump, he heard the sinister, tinny buzz of a diamond-back rattler. Another and another sounded. The place was a nest of them, a regular stamping ground. Near at hand, where Colby reined in his own snorting horse, it was alive with snakes, buzzing ominously.

Colby felt his back crawl, felt his nerves string tight.

"Chet!" he called fearfully. "Chet— you in there?"

There was no answer. The deadly spell induced by the snakes' angry buzzing descended on Colby like a pall. The wild cow had gone crashing on, bawling, stirring the reptiles into a lethal frenzy. She was somewhere off on the other side by now, headed for the open range.

It was the undertone of quiet inside the clump where Chet Neddick lay that made Colby really tremble.

He rode off from the clump a few feet, got down shakily from his horse and tied the animal firmly to a single spike of bush. Then, gun in hand, he approached the clump again on foot.

The snakes buzzing had lost its first high tension and was quieting into a sing-song chorus that seemed to come intermittently from all parts of the brush.

Colby saw a fat brown body slither over a rock and he gunned with savage quickness.

At the sound of the shot the whole brigade of rattlers lifted again to a high,

warning note. But the one that Colby had fired at was a squirming, bloody mass among the stems.

Colby moved in past the dying snake. He moved with short, sharp breaths that almost hurt; moved with a crawling sensation of terror along the unprotected backs of his legs. His eyes swiveled, trying to see among the criss-crossed shadows just where Neddick had fallen and why he didn't answer.

There was something spine-chilling and deceptive about the snakes' continued buzzing. Colby couldn't tell whether the warning rattles were near or far away.

A seven-foot reptile thrust a triangular head up from behind a rock three feet off, directly in Colby's path, and he was taken off guard. He was almost on top of the snake. His shot and the blast of gun-flame went directly into the rattler's opening mouth. The snake collapsed and died, its head split open, within inches of Colby's boot.

He moved more knowingly after that, keeping a sharp lookout straight ahead, steeling himself to disregard the buzzing to right and left.

He shot two more snakes and reloaded his gun before he glimpsed Neddick.

NEDDICK was lying sprawled on a rock, stunned or dead, Colby couldn't tell which. His baby-smooth face showed a certain blandness even as he lay with closed eyes toward the sky. One sleeve was caught in a catclaw bush, holding the arm up in a sort of mocking gesture of salutation as though he had known Colby would come. There was a big rattler which, in the excitement caused by the stampeding cow, the frightened horse and Colby's grim entry, had taken refuge close to Neddick's body atop the rock. The reptile's tail was a quivering finger of warning in the center of its round-looped form. If Neddick moved so much as an inch it would strike.

Colby blew its head off, then shot another snake that was too close for comfort.

He reached the rock and cautiously unhooked Neddick's thorn-impaled sleeve. Neddick's arm fell limply back. Colby tried to lift him and found that his chunky, inert body was surprisingly heavy.

Straining, swearing, keeping his gun between the fingers of his right hand with painful effort, Colby finally managed to lift Neddick up on his own broad back. The aching curve of his left arm held Neddick there.

He turned then and faced back the way he had come, knowing that he couldn't count on its being free of snakes. They had a way of shifting. He began the slow return, burdened with Neddick's body, fighting away the thorns that clutched like devil's fingers, keeping his eyes sharply alert.

The writhing bodies of the snakes he had shot were like grim mileposts along that back-track. Beside one he came to was the living form of its mate. Colby's first cramped shot missed. Burdened as he was, driving his muscles almost beyond endurance, he had to fire three times before the snake unlooped and crawled away.

He didn't dare set Neddick down. Too many snakes in too many places. He staggered forward, bending his head down, gasping for breath, trying to avoid the thorns as best he could and keep his gun ready.

The weight that lifted from his back when he finally reached open sunlight was greater than the weight of Neddick's body. Colby was sweating like a fool.

But he didn't quit now. He lifted Neddick up onto his own bronc's saddle and mounted behind him.

He rode slowly, easily, not knowing how badly Neddick was hurt or whether he was even alive, but taking no chances of jarring him more than could be helped.

Neddick let out a groan just before they reached the ranch house. Colby carried him inside and laid him gently in his bunk. He got a pan of cold water and a cloth from the kitchen and returned.

The first swipe of damp moisture across Neddick's face brought him back to consciousness. Neddick opened his baby-blue eyes, stared up at Colby curiously, then lay quiet for almost a minute, gathering his wits and his strength.

"How come you lugged me back here, Vic?" he said at last.

"Why not?" demanded Colby.

"You hate my guts," said Neddick. "Why didn't you just leave me?"

"I should have!" Colby growled. "You was gettin' ready to steal what cows you hadn't poisoned."

"Steal 'em!" Neddick blinked up angrily. "Half belongs to me, don't they? I was gettin' ready to break up our danged partnership that never should have been. I was gettin' ready to clear out an' sell you my half of the spread."

"Have *me* sell you mine cheap, you mean!"

"So that's what you figured." Neddick closed his eyes for a moment. Then, in a burst of returning strength, he sat up.

"Look, son" he said huskily. "We don't hit it off. You think I'm a know-it-all and talk too much. You even think I'm a dirty damn crook. I think you're a dim-witted, bad-tempered puppy. An' about them cows—"

"Didn't you poison 'em?"

"Hell no. Look in my jacket pocket."

Colby did as he was told. He pulled out a wilted weed of some sort that looked to him like the lily family.

"Death camus," said Neddick. "Them fool cows ate it an' killed themselves."

"How come you didn't tell me that?" asked Colby coldly.

"'Cause I figured to let you find it out for yourself, son. I knew you was sick of me tellin' you things."

"Trouble is you know too damn much," Colby exploded. "You even know how to fight an' lick a man ten years younger than yourself an' twice as big."

Neddick cleared his throat with noisy impatience.

"And you don't know enough to see that suspicion of a feller is just like that plant there—it grows where you don't see it first. Once you find it an' start to chewin' on it you get the taste. Finally it gets you."

"Yeah!" said Colby huskily. "Yeah, go on. I'm listenin'."

Neddick grinned. His voice was suddenly clearer, stronger.

"What do you mean, you'll listen? You don't want to break up?"

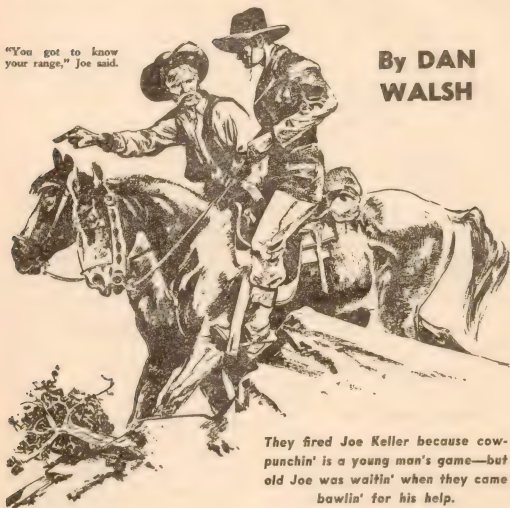
"Not right now anyways. We'll have a hell of a time bein' partners, Chet. I know that much. We wasn't meant to be in the beginnin'. But—well—I can stand it if you can."

"Shake!" was all Chet Neddick said.

TOO OLD TO RIDE

"You got to know your range," Joe said.

By **DAN WALSH**



They fired Joe Keller because cow-punchin' is a young man's game—but old Joe was waitin' when they came bawlin' for his help.

OLD Joe Keller folded both elbows over Beelzebub's sharp withers and squinted one skeptical eye up at his ex-employer.

"S'matter, Mr. Hardin? Couldn't they track 'em?" Joe shifted his chew of tobacco with elaborate care as he looked past Hardin to the three young men squirming uncomfortably in their saddles. "You got a lot of cowboys there. 'Pears to me they oughta be able to find ten head of horses."

"They undoubtedly could, in time." Mr. Hardin's voice was as crisp as the

white shirt he wore carefully tucked into whipcord trousers. "But the buyer is here waiting. They're four-year-old quarter horses, you know. Very valuable. We must find them at once."

Joe spat imperturbably into the corral dust. "Wal, they can't get away."

"I don't see how they got out of the corral last night," Mr. Hardin said with considerable annoyance. "We had them here, ready. We've looked for them now for three hours, and the buyer is growing impatient."

"Natur'ly." Joe's smoldering anger

ruffled his voice. He was not much bigger than a pint of whiskey and as bow-legged as a man can get in seventy years of hard riding, but he could be definitely hard to handle when aroused. As he was now.

"Look, Joe." Mr. Hardin drew in a deep breath. "I know I discharged you last night—"

"Fired," Joe corrected bluntly.

"All right, fired! After all, I'm the new business manager of this ranch. In times like these that means getting full value for all money expended—"

"You don't need to repeat yourself," Joe interrupted with an edged drawl. "You told me last night I was too old to earn m' pay. You said cowpunchin' was a young man's profession. Wal, mebbe-so." He spat again, contemptuously. "Personal, I kept findin' out things about cows and horses for more than forty, fifty year."

He broke off abruptly, cuffing his hat far forward to hide the steely glint in his gray eyes. Twenty-five of those years had been spent here at Goblet. Maybe he was too old to find a job with a strange outfit, but he *knew* this ranch. Every water hole, every bush, every cow right down to the last cocklebur in her tail. He'd weathered a lot of hard-nosed foremen during those twenty-five years because Goblet was home to him. Now he was being licked by a pink-checked dude who thought cows and horses were just bank notes covered with hair.

"We lost the tracks over in Seco Canyon," Hardin explained, keeping his voice even. "One of the boys suggested that you could probably find the colts quickly, since you might know where they'd be apt to go."

"Ahuh!" Joe ran a loving hand through Beelzebub's thick black mane. The old blood-bay horse had been in his string for fifteen years, the only real pard he'd had since the old days. Joe had been smug in the knowledge that he and Bub could work more cattle in a day than any ten drug-store cowboys the boss could pick up. If he had to leave now, old Bub would probably be used for wrangling—him that could roll up within roping distance of any cow on the ranch!

Hardin became downright persuasive. "You can't go into town until we find

them anyway, Joe, since you were going to ride in with the buyer. What do you say?"

"Hell!"

That was all Joe said as he grabbed a handful of Bub's mane and started pulling him toward the saddle shop. Old Bub laid his ears flat in cranky protest, but he followed and stood quietly while Joe unsaddled his saddle and threw it into place. Joe paused in the cinching to cock one flinty eye at the manager.

"I'm jes' wonderin'," he drawled acidly, "how in hell you're goin' to hold a beef roundup when you can't even find ten head of horses that are bound to be within a few miles of the ranch."

Mr. Hardin was too busy examining the wrapping on his saddle horn to answer. Joe jerked the cinch tight, swung into his saddle and set out at a stiff gallop toward Seco Canyon. Hardin, he noticed, was following. The three cowboys were not.

The range was broken, with dry brushy canyons separating the jagged ridges that sloped up to the main backbone of the mountain. Joe tipped off into Seco Canyon, saw at a glance where the tracks disappeared in the gravel of the creek bed, and kept right on going up the next ridge. There he pulled Bub to a halt, shoved his hat far back to give the cool breeze a chance at his thinning gray hair, and calmly rolled a cigarette.

His keen eyes, however, remained busy, ranging down through the brush-filled draws to the flat country beyond where the heat waves danced and the soapweeds lay mirrored in a shimmering lake. A mirage lake that was always beyond reach, like a man's dreams. Bub, too, was looking, flicking his short ears nervously.

"What are you stopping for?" Hardin asked impatiently.

"Lookin'," Joe drawled. "Jes' lookin', Mr. Hardin. Try it sometime." He lit his cigarette before adding dryly, "This country's been here a long time, don't you know it? Never got in no hurry and never saved no money, but it's still here and lookin' tolerable healthy."

Hardin snorted. "Don't you think we ought to look down in those draws?"

"Nope. If there'd been any stock down there, Bub would have seen 'em." Joe jerked a thumb at the horse, who was now

swishing flies in complete boredom. "Didja ever watch your horse when you're lookin' for stock, Mr. Hardin? He'll spot 'em 'fore you will. Now you take these young bucks—" He waved his cigarette in the general direction of the ranch. "They run the legs off their horses and it *shore* looks like they're workin', but they never stop to look. And they don't bring in no horses. There's a spring up here aways. We'll take a look-see there."

The spring to which he referred lay in a secluded pocket a third of the way up the mountain. It was the type of place that horses would not voluntarily leave, with good grass, plenty of shade, protecting rocks. As Joe topped out on the rocky ridge above the spot, he again pulled to a halt and looked, not at the spring, but at Bub's ears. They had flicked forward and were focused on some object below.

Joe grinned. "There's your colts, Mr. Hardin. I ain't seen 'em yet, but this old feller's got 'em spotted."

"Yes." Hardin sounded as if he were strangling as he made his admission. "I'd never have found them here."

"You got to know your range," Joe said with quiet pride. "While you take 'em out of here, I'm goin' down and make one last check on that mud tank below here. It's goin' dry and I'm afraid the boys'll forget to move them cattle."

Hardin flushed painfully. "Joe, I— Well, I'm completely turned around. Where is the ranch?"

For once in his life Joe Keller maintained a tactful silence as he ran the horses out of the pocket and hazed them back to the corral. He was pulling his saddle off the sweating Beelzebub when Hardin approached and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Joe, I'm sorry about last night," he said frankly. That frankness thawed a good deal of the ice that had jammed in Joe's throat. "I was hasty. If you'll consider staying on here, I'm sure the Goblet outfit will be glad to pay for your forty, fifty years of experience."

"I'll think it over," Joe said gruffly.

Hardin didn't wait for further answer but hurried off to join the buyer in the far corral.

Old Joe Keller watched him go, a quizzical light in his squinted eyes. Then, gently, he ran a gnarled hand down Bub's near front leg, feeling the hard muscle, loving every ripple of it. With infinite care, he lifted the foot and dug the gravel out of the tender crevices.

"I'll tack them shoes back on in the mornin', old feller," he mumbled apologetically. "One of them young bucks jes' mighta noticed if there'd been a set of shod tracks follerin' them colts out of the corral."

VOYAGEURS of the fur-trade days were a tough breed. Traveling far and strange rivers, cataracts and unnavigable rapids were often encountered, necessitating a portage. Then the back must bend, and provisions and barter be carried over what was often extremely rough country.

If the portage was a short one, the load was carried the entire distance; but if a rest was necessary, then the voyageurs carried all goods to the resting place before proceeding further. Resting places were called *posés* and were half a mile apart.

William Thurston Boutwell, a Minnesota missionary, recorded in his journal of June, 1832:

"At four in the morning, the men began their days work, and made twelve *posés*, through mud and water in many places to their knees. A rain during the day has rendered the path much worse than it otherwise would have been. Yet the men take their keg of pork, 70 lbs. and bag of flour, 80 lbs., and in some instances two bags, and a keg 230 lbs., and carry it half a mile before they rest. In a few instances, men have taken 3 bags—240 lbs."

Boutwell also mentions squaws carrying a bag of flour and a soldier's knapsack containing their belongings on their backs, with a child on top of it.

—R. V.

CUSTER'S FIRST STAND

★ ★ ★ By JOSEPH W. QUINN ★ ★ ★

In November of 1868 General Custer, under orders from Major General Phil Sheridan, set out at the head of four detachments, or eight hundred men, to "wipe out all Indian villages, wherever found." This was eight years before Custer's debacle at the Little Big Horn, when he and all his men were annihilated in one of the worst defeats suffered by the Army of the West in all their years of Indian warfare.

Custer ran into trouble at the Little Big Horn because of faulty execution of military tactics. The Custer of the Washita, in 1868, was a precision destroyer whose every move was calculated and executed with exactness and finesse.

On November 26th in 1868, at the point where the boundary of the Texas Panhandle crosses the Canadian River, Custer's two advance scouts—a pair of Osage Indians named Little Beaver and Hard Rope, who traveled on foot and who also served as guides—spotted the trail of a war party which had traveled off to the south-east. There was snow on the ground and it was easy to discern that the trail was fresh.

The four detachments of cavlarymen took up the trail, marched until 9:00 that night, when Little Beaver and Hard Rope came upon a dead fire. Custer asked for volunteer scouts. A number of soldiers dismounted, abandoned their sabers so that their rattling would not betray them, then moved off with Little Beaver and Hard Rope to scout the danger-infested territory that lay ahead.

Behind them on the snow-covered prairie waited seven hundred-odd horsemen, eerie figures in the milky white light of a brilliant moon.

Presently the scouts returned, gave Custer a description of the Indian village and the surrounding terrain. He made his plans. Quietly the detachments moved into position. They surrounded the unsuspecting village and at daybreak launched a devastating attack. The Indians, behind trees, in ravines, in the river bed, fired at the attackers, but their resistance was quickly broken. When the attack opened, the band that had accompanied Custer's outfit struck up the strains of *Garry Owen*.

Most of the defending Indians were killed, the others taken captive. Custer pushed on, attacking and wiping out one village after the other. Then, suddenly, Custer decided it was time to turn back, which he did, immediately, despite the fact that one of his officers and some fourteen men were missing.

There has been a lot of discussion, pro and con, as to why Custer did not search for the missing group before he started back to the fort. Ten days later he was out on the trail again. He found the missing men, dead and scalped.

Sam Nordin had personal reasons for making the suicidal wild-horse safari into Zopilote's bandit kingdom—and better reasons for believing he'd never get back.

CHAPTER

No Man to Trust

I

"Find old Thomas Bloomingdale when you get to El Paso," they told Sam Nordin in Cheyenne. "Old Thomas knows more about wild horses than any man in Texas. If you're set on getting mustangs out of Mexico, old Thomas will know how to get 'em across the border if anybody does. But you're plumb crazy to try to drive a herd through Mexican outlaw country."

Sam had answered, almost impatiently, "I want to make a stake and make it in a hurry." He didn't tell why.

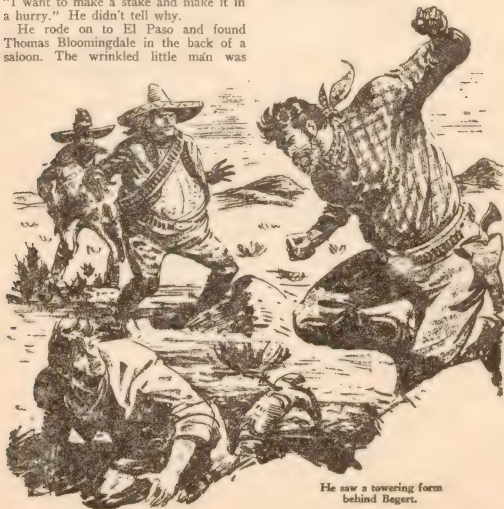
He rode on to El Paso and found Thomas Bloomingdale in the back of a saloon. The wrinkled little man was

white-haired and very old, and it didn't take much whiskey to make him talk.

"I was a mustanger when Texas was still a part of the Mexican Republic," he said, mumbling a little because he didn't have any teeth. "I can remember when I rounded up eighteen hundred wild horses back in 1830—that's fifty-four years ago—and drove them east to Louisiana."

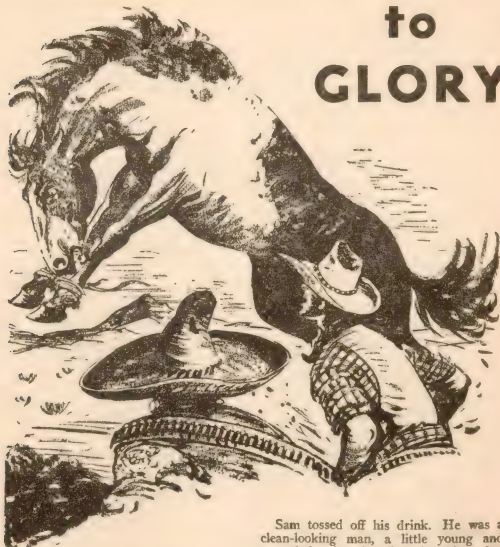
Sam Nordin asked bluntly, "Where are the mustangs now?"

"No more big herds in the Nueces country," Old Thomas said. "Got to go down to Chihuahua."



He saw a towering form behind Begert.

MUSTANG TRAIL to GLORY



*Dramatic Action
Novelette*

**By
NOEL M. LOOMIS**

Sam tossed off his drink. He was a clean-looking man, a little young and smooth-faced and a little impatient, but his gray eyes were weatherwise and his square-crowned, narrow-brimmed hat, pulled to a peak at the front, spoke of range savvy. "Where in Chihuahua?" he asked.

The old man said thoughtfully, "You'll need money."

"I've got money," said Sam, and instantly regretted saying it, for the old man's folded eyelids raised and he looked at Sam.

"Don't be telling that down here," Old

Thomas said sharply. "They'd kill a man fer his boots down here. El Paso is tougher than Natchitoches used to be back before the Texas Republic."

Sam loosened his Peacemaker in his holster. "I keep one empty chamber," he said. "Where do you go for mustangs?"

The old man said, "Stand another?"

Sam threw down a silver dollar.

The old man turned the shot glass between his thumb and forefinger. "Go down the street to the Notice Tree and turn right to the Todos Hombres Saloon. Ask for Bill Begert. He buys horses from Mexico sometimes, and he knows Chihuahua and Coahuila like the back of his horse's ears."

The old man sat back. "What are you aimin' to do with six or eight hundred mustangs?"

"I'm going to trail them north to Cheyenne. They'll bring from twenty-five to forty dollars a head up there. Montana and the Dakota Territory are full of Texas cattle but short on horses. I figure on selling to the highest bidder. Then I'll take my money and buy cattle for a ranch up in the Big Horn Mountains. I've got grazing rights on ten sections up there."

He didn't add that half of the money in his belt now was what Illeanne Hughes' father had left her; that he and Illeanne were in partnership on the horses and were going into a life partnership when he got back. The picture in his mind of Illeanne riding her scrub pony free in the wind, her brown eyes flashing, was something he would keep to himself.

"I'll give you some advice," the old man said. "It's easy to find horses in Mexico. Your worst trouble will be getting them across the border. There's a Mexican outlaw down there. They call him Zopilote—that means Buzzard—and he has a reg'lar army. Five hundred men, some say.

"He works tongue-and-bit with another bunch of outlaws that hangs out in the Big Bend on this side of the Rio Grande. Headquarters around Pecos. Name of Galloway—Red Galloway. When an American with money goes into Mexico, Galloway tips off Zopilote. Zopilote splits with Galloway, and vicey versey. So be careful. Take a couple of Americans with you—somebody you can trust."

"How do you find somebody to trust in El Paso?" Sam asked.

"You can't," said the old man. He drank the whiskey slowly as if he enjoyed every drop. Then he went on, "If you can get your horses back across the Rio Grande near El Paso, you're all right. But the minute you get across, pay off the Mexicans you hired in Chihuahua and get yourself a new crew. The Mexicans work for the highest dollar—" Old Thomas chuckled—"and who doesn't? You'll have to use 'em down in Mexico but don't trust 'em any further'n you have to. Americans, either, for that matter." He stared at the wall. "Can you pay off the crew when you get back here?"

Sam nodded. He could pay off his help at the border and just about have enough money left to buy food and pay tolls for the drive to Cheyenne. He could pick up a crew at the Rio Grande that would go all the way and take their pay at the other end. He rubbed the money-belt under his shirt.

It was a small motion but the old man's eyes caught it. He said, "Better leave your money in a bank, son. Holdup men are thick as ticks on a South Texas steer down here. There was an express robbery down at Sierra Blanca last night. Two men killed. Twelve thousand dollars in gold was taken."

"Which bank can you trust?"

"None of 'em."

Sam got up and shifted his gunbelt. "I can trust myself," he said firmly. "See you in Santa Fe, oldtimer." He pulled his hat tight and went out. . . .

BILL BEGERT was a red-eyed, sandy-whiskered, heavy-joweled man in the back room of the Todos Hombres. It was a small room with a low ceiling, rank with kerosene fumes and swirling with the smoke from strong tobacco.

Bill Begert looked rough, and for an instant Sam Nordin felt like backing out. But he had come a long way and he was in a hurry to get started. Begert looked like a man with plenty of savvy, and Sam had a lot of confidence in his Peacemaker. He told Begert what he wanted.

Begert watched him with his head bent over as if it was too heavy, his eyes looking up. "What's your proposition?"

"We each put up half. When we catch the horses, we choose every other one. When we get back across the border, the partnership is over."

Begert said thickly, "I show you where to go. I find the horses. I put up half the money. And you take half of what we get. That ain't fifty-fifty. What do I get for showing you where to go?"

Sam looked at him sharply. "You need me," he said. "Maybe you need a gun you can depend on when the outlaws come. Otherwise you'd be down there now."

Begert grinned. "You win," he said. "When do we start?"

For a moment Sam was troubled. Begert had conceded too readily. But Sam threw off the doubt. Time was precious. He wanted to get those mustangs across the South Platte before snow.

He said, "Can you raise your share of the money by morning?"

He was troubled on that point. He was afraid Begert might figure on horning in without putting up any money—and Sam didn't have enough for both of them.

He figured it would take about fifteen hundred to go south, gather up six or eight hundred head, break them, and get back to the border. He'd have five hundred dollars left to make the trip north, and that was close. He couldn't even spare enough to buy a wedding present for Illeana. He'd do that after he sold the horses in Cheyenne, if there was anything wonderful enough.

He looked at Begert and he didn't like the strange glint in Begert's eyes. Begert said, "I'll match dollars with you in the morning. You go ahead and get the outfit. I'll pay half."

Sam bought a chuck-wagon and a pair of Spanish mules. He was buying flour and beans and side-bacon at the general store when a stringy cowhand approached him. "You need a cook, Mister?" he asked.

Sam looked him over. He was pretty seedy and he probably had held onto a dollar overnight, but he did look honest. "You're pretty young to be a cook," Sam said.

The boy grinned. "You're pretty young yourself to be as sharp a mule-buyer as you are."

Sam's eyes shot over him again. "San

Antone?" he asked. "That your town?"

The boy nodded. "Lefty Davis is my handle. I got paid off yesterday morning for a drive from Brownsville. The herd is going on to California, but the boss decided to ship them by railroad."

"Broke now?"

Lefty grinned sheepishly. "Got in a monte game yesterday."

"Sleep out last night?"

Lefty nodded.

Sam said thoughtfully, "I could use a cook who can wrangle broncs. It won't be a big outfit. I'm going down in Chihuahua after mustangs. Thirty dollars a month."

Lefty grinned cheerfully. "Anything in Mexico," he said, "is figured at fighting wages. How about forty?"

Sam was satisfied. Lefty had been around. "You're a cook and a remudero till we cross the border coming back. I'll get you fed up tonight and buy you a bed. Tobacco money in the morning."

Lefty said soberly, "If we cross the border, Mister."

But Sam wasn't worried too much that night as he sat down on his bed and took off his boots. He was getting somewhere. He had an outfit organized; he had a man who knew the country; he had a hand he felt he could count on.

Old Thomas Bloomingdale had told him to take a couple of Americans. There would be Bill Begert, and Bill had said he'd have a man too. Begert looked a little shifty, but he was an American. Sam figured that was enough as long as they were in Mexico.

Begert paid off his half of the purchases the next morning in newly minted double gooses. The gold was reassuring. Begert said he had hired an extra hand who would ride out after them and Sam forgot his misgivings until late that afternoon when they were twenty miles south of El Paso on the road to Chihuahua. Three men rode up with them and reported to Bill Begert.

Begert hired them. "Rusty Jones, Hoddy Henderson, and Gents Gentry," he announced. "They're all good hands. I've worked with 'em."

They looked like a bunch of horse-thieves. There wasn't much Sam could do, so he tried to overlook it. But Lefty

Davis, swaying in the seat like a limber beargrass spike against the lurching of the chuckwagon, said shrewdly, "Looks like we're outnumbered."

Sam looked at him sharply. "Do you think Begert told those fellows to ride after us?"

Lefty looked back "Do you?" he asked. Sam drew a deep breath. "I *know* he did. But I don't know what to do about it."

"Neither do I," said Lefty. "If they're figuring on anything dirty, it would only hurry it up if we tried to go back. We're in Mexico now, you know."

"Yeah." Sam's mare kicked up a little spray of loose sand with every step, and the chuckwagon groaned a little as it lurched along the road with the span of mules. "I think we'd better go ahead with it. Get all the mustangs we can corral, then take our chances on getting back. At least half of the herd will belong to me, no matter what happens."

"Not if you're dead."

Sam stared at him. "Keep talking," he said.

"Down in this country, when two men go fifty-fifty on a deal like this, if one doesn't come back, the other one gets it all."

Sam swallowed. He began to feel sick. If anything happened to him, Ilcane's share would go to Begert.

If Sam had been a little older he would have forced a showdown then, but he was young and in a hurry. He decided to take a chance. They might be imagining a lot of things anyway. After all, Old Thomas Bloomingdale had sent him to Begert. "We'll keep riding," Sam said.

CHAPTER

2

King Stallion

Begert was a mustanger, all right. He took them to Bachimba, west of Chihuahua: a little cluster of adobe huts and a whitewashed church. There they recruited twenty Mexican hands in charge of a remudero named Manuel.

Manuel was a big, swarthy, pock-marked man with a long black mustache. He grinned constantly without mirth but with a fine display of strong white teeth.

"Si," he said. "We fine cowboys. We help you catch horses. You pay the men ten pesos a month. You pay me—feefy." He grinned.

"That's all right," Begert said to Sam.

"Why is Manuel getting so much more?"

Begert's eyes looked from under half-closed lids. "For getting the others to work for less. They don't speak English. He tells them ten pesos is big money."

"He's selling out his own people."

Begert shrugged. "This is Mexico."

Sam was quiet. He was beginning to think that Begert knew too much about Mexico. But he could find no fault with Begert's work. The man knew mustangs and mustang country. Within a week he had located half a dozen small herds and one of several hundred.

He set guards to keep the horses away from the water-holes. He took the rest of the men to a long arroyo that formed a natural trap. They built a strong mesquite-brush fence across the narrow end, and then, with small pines dragged down from the hills, they built corrals and chutes.

On the eighth day Manuel reported the big herd was wild. Begert got the hands all together. They went out and located the herd and drove it toward the arroyo. Within a few hours they had four hundred and fifty mustangs in the trap. They closed it from behind. Then Begert and Sam stood up on the fence, looking them over.

Sam said, "Choose."

Begert said, "I'll take the big paint over there."

A Mexican's loop settled over the horse's neck and the horse was pulled into the chute.

Sam pointed to a mousy gray horse with a black stripe down his back. "I'll take the coyote dun."

Begert grinned. "You know your horses, don't you?"

"I think so," Sam answered evenly.

"I want that little roan," said Begert.

The Mexican hands road-branded the horses with a running-iron. Begert's were burned with a BB Bar on the neck; Sam's carried S & I on the right hip. Begert looked at him curiously when he saw the brand, but Sam did not explain.

Lefty Davis acted as inspector to see what Sam's horses got the right brand, and kept books on them. The rest of the hands threw high-pommeled Mexican saddles on the broncs, climbed aboard, fastened their spurs under the cinch-straps, and broke the mustangs on the spot.

Some of the broncs were too scrubby to use, gimlet-hipped and pinch-withered. They were turned out. The average of those retained was not a cowman's dream, but they were good enough to bring thirty dollars or more in Cheyenne.

By sundown they had broken and turned loose on the Mexican prairie, hobbled so they could not run, over eighty horses. Begert, sitting on the fence, said, "You take one more and we'll quit. It'll be my first choice in the morning."

Sam, looking up, saw the sun slanting through Begert's sandy whiskers and it looked as if there was an odd glow around his face. That, Sam figured, was obviously imagination. He picked out a little muckle-dun mare and climbed back over the fence.

"It's strange," he said to Begert, "that there wasn't a real good horse at the head of that big caballado."

Begert did not answer. Sam found out why the next morning when he climbed the fence. Out in the center of the herd, standing shoulders above the mustangs, was a beautiful Arabian.

He was black and white, with an arched, proud neck, tossing tail, and a mane that flowed from his neck when he took short, nervous runs of a few yards from side to side and then stood pawing the dirt in the center. He was a perfect throwback to his Arab-Barb ancestors brought over from Spain.

Sam's eyes stuck out. He said excitedly, "There's the leader. How did he get in here?"

Begert nodded wisely. "Nice horse."

"We'll split him," Sam said, unable to take his eyes from the horse. What a wonderful present that stallion would be for Illeana.

But Begert's harsh voice turned him around. "We don't split," said Begert. "It's my turn."

He waved an arm, and one of his men ran out to the milling cluster of horses around the stallion. A lariat settled over

the stallion's head. He plunged toward the side of the arroyo. The cowhand braced himself. The horse was jerked end for end, but the cowhand went whirling like a wagon-wheel and ended up on his face.

"Get another rope," Begert roared.

THEY roped him again. They had four ropes on his neck before they got him branded, while Sam watched with devastated feelings.

Lefty Davis came over and said, "That horse wasn't in the trap last night. They must have found him when they first located the herd, and Begert had somebody run him down. Then they held out yesterday, and slipped him into the herd last night." He loosened the pistol in his holster. "What are you aiming to do?"

"There's nothing I can do," said Sam. "If Manuel knows anything about it, he has been paid to keep his mouth shut."

"We could take up the subject under new business," said Lefty Davis casually.

Sam looked at the stringy cowhand. Sam was worried. "No, we're too far in Mexico and we're two against four with no telling what the Mexicans will do. Probably Begert has already bought off Manuel. We can't do anything but accept it."

"It'll get worse," Lefty prophesied.

"All I hope," said Sam, "is that it doesn't get too bad until we get within shootin' distance of the border."

Sam did not choose another horse right away. They were saddling the big stallion, and Sam held his breath. The horse was broad-chested, powerful-hipped, straight-backed. Illeana would love him.

Sam went up to Begert. "I'll give you three mustangs for him."

Begert was scornful. "This stallion's worth thirty mustangs," he said, "when I get him broke."

"Three hundred cash," said Sam. He dared not offer more.

Begert stared at Sam, and Sam thought he was about to take it. But Begert's eyes glinted suspiciously. "What do you want him so bad for?" He added, "If you want him that bad now, you'll pay more later."

Sam didn't understand that then, but he did later. For Begert was not the man to break the stallion. Brute strength and cruelty might break a mustang, but not this Arabian three hundred years out of time. It would take understanding, sympathetic kinship with a proud spirit. Sam knew that but Begert didn't.

The stallion began to buck when they un-eared him. Begert was in the saddle. The stallion erupted. Begert rode easily, but right in the middle of coming down to earth, it seemed, the stallion reached for sky in great big handfuls. Begert picked himself out of the dirt. The stallion was still going and still bucking against the saddle on his back. They roped him and brought him back.

This time Begert stayed on until the stallion straightened out and began to buck in a line, going across the prairie. It wasn't hard riding but it was wearing. Three miles out the stallion was still going strong but Begert was exhausted. He turned loose and hit the dirt.

When they brought him back he was white. He climbed up on the fence and said, "Your turn to pick one, Nordin."

They went through that every day. Begert rode the stallion but he didn't break him. In the meantime they finished working the big herd and started to bring in the smaller ones. Their caballado was growing. All told they had nearly eight hundred horses.

Then came the morning when Sam heard the unforgettable terror-scream of a horse. He ran out to see Begert facing the stallion. Hoddy Henderson and Gents Gentry had ropes on the stallion's neck, one on each side. The horse was rearing and plunging at Begert, but they had snubbed the ropes on posts, and every time the stallion reared, striking at Begert with iron-hard front hoofs, Begert would slash the horse in the face with a heavy bridle. And each time he swung the bridle he made a hoarse cry that was like nothing human.

Sam stood there, his fists clenching and unclenching. Sweat rolled down his face; at each plunge it seemed as if the sandy-haired man was striking Illeana.

Lefty was beside him. He said in a low voice, "Watch yourself, Sam."

Sam choked for a minute. "How can a

human being bring himself to do that?"

He walked out into the open. The stallion was trumpeting a shrill cry of hate for Begert. Sam called out, "Stop, Begert."

Begert turned. His eyes were reddish. He eyed Sam and he was thinking, hunting the answer. He found it. Sam knew, because Begert's eyes took on a new, satanic light. He said, "What's it to you?"

"I'll give you my half of the herd for him," Sam said huskily.

Begert's sun-whitened lips twisted and he said harshly, "If he's worth that much to you, he's worth that to me."

Sam understood then. Begert was more determined to break Sam than he was to break the horse.

Probably Begert had expected Sam to blow his top long before. Then Begert would kill him and Lefty, and take Sam's money.

Sam looked at the two men snubbing the stallion. Each of them was holding the rope in his left hand and a gun in his right. Sam looked at the sardonic expression in Begert's eyes. He met them fully. Then he turned slowly and went back, tight inside almost to the point of explosion.

A WEEK later they moved camp. Begert whipped the stallion again that morning, and after that the horse was kept staked. Even so, the horse reared savagely when Begert came within his sight, until finally Begert put a gunny-sack over the horse's head.

The new territory was productive, but there were no more Arabians. Begert was busy with the roundup. Within three weeks more they tallied over fifteen hundred head all told.

They emptied the big corral one afternoon, and Sam said the thing he had been dreading to say, "We better start back."

Begert looked at him, and an inscrutable light came into his opaque blue eyes. "You got enough?"

"We've got about all we can handle."

"Suits me," said Begert.

They started back, Lefty Davis driving the chuckwagon ahead, Sam on the flank. Begert rode the side ahead of Sam,

and Manuel rode the drag on the same line. It was three hundred miles to El Paso, a little closer if they went straight to the Big Bend. Begert wanted to go to the Bend, but Sam was firm for El Paso. Strangely enough, Begert gave in.

Lefty didn't like that. He said, "Begert wanted to go to El Paso. Why?"

"I don't know."

Eight days later Sam, riding alongside the chuckwagon for a breather and scanning the semi-desert far ahead, shifted his gun-belt. "Things are too easy. We haven't even seen a small bunch of bandits. It's almost as if Zopilote had told the little fellows to lay off." He raised uneasily in the saddle.

"Maybe he's waiting till we get pretty near there," said Lefty, "to save him the trouble of driving them."

Sam looked up abruptly. "Old Thomas said the big thing was to get across the border. Maybe he knew what he was talking about."

"If he did, why did he steer you onto Begert?"

"He's an old man. He may not see as much as he thinks he does any more. He knows horses, but maybe he can't figure out a man as quick as he used to."

"Anyway," Lefty said cheerfully, "I'm tired of breathing nice clear air up here ahead of the point. I'm trading off with a Mexican tomorrow so I can ride the flank back there. Not that it'll do any good, but I want to be in at the windup."

"Maybe we got Begert wrong," Sam said hopefully. "Maybe there won't be a showdown."

"Mebbe you'll wake up in Cheyenne in the morning," Lefty said, "riding Begert's stallion."

He looked into the distance. "Trouble with you is, Sam, you're so set on getting your caballado to Wyoming that you get in a hurry. You hope things ain't going to happen when you know right well they're bound to happen."

Sam rode back, and as usual he looked for the stallion. It was easy to spot the horse, for Begert kept him hobbled, and all day the big stallion worked hard to keep up with the herd. He would take two steps with his hind legs and then gather his haunches and jump forward with his front legs together. Sam kept his

lips tightly pressed when he was near Begert; the horse's progress was painful to watch. It must have been a killing effort for the horse.

Now Sam looked for the familiar up-and-down motion of the horse's head as he crow-hopped along in the big herd. Begert had kept a gunnysack over the stallion's head, and if the stallion had not been forced to travel in a tight-packed herd the sack would have been a benefit because it helped to keep the sand out of his nostrils. But in the herd it was a handicap, for the stallion frequently ended his jump by bringing his head down on a mustang's rump, and he had been kicked a number of times in the chest.

Sam located him traveling near the edge of the herd even with Begert. That was surprising, because Begert always started the horse out in the morning on the opposite side. Sam had begun to think, as a matter of fact, that Begert was a little afraid of the stallion.

Around the fire that night Begert said, "We'll be in sight of El Paso in two more days."

Sam looked up. Begert's voice had not been directed at him. Begert was staring from the fire with his head high, his beared, heavy-joweled face turned westward. Sam looked that way but saw nothing.

Begert detected the movement and turned back. "Just keeping a watch," he said quickly. "This is bandit country, between here and the border."

It reassured Sam but not Lefty. Lefty cleaned his gun that night and oiled it. On second thought, Sam checked his too.

They had water the next morning, but Begert said there would be no more until they hit the Rio Grande. That afternoon the stallion worked over to Begert's side of the herd again. Sam noticed the sack was wearing through along the horse's cheeks, where it had been rubbed countless times against the rumps of the mustangs.

CHAPTER

3

Satan Takes Over

They camped dry that night. Tension was rising. Sam and Lefty took a

slow swing around the milling herd.

"The horses are restless," Sam said. "It's dry work, trailing through the sand all day in the hot sun."

"There's others restless," said Lefty grimly.

"Maybe it's just excitement from getting close to the end of the trail."

Lefty slapped his horse's rump with his open hand. "You're still optimistic," he said. "Maybe it's a good thing. I'd a shot it out long ago and got this settled."

"Yes, and not had a herd to bring back."

"Is that worse than bringing a herd back and then handing it over to somebody else who claims it on six-shooter rights?"

Sam was standing in the stirrups. "Is that a campfire—over west there, toward the mountains?"

Lefty looked. "It could be a reflection from low clouds. We better go have a look."

Sam said decisively, "Not both of us. If that's what we both think it is, we'd have a showdown with Begert if we were gone long enough to have a look. I don't want it that way. We've got fifteen hundred head of horses, and every mile we get closer to the U. S. border, the better I feel. No, you take a sashay over that way, but don't be gone too long and don't go too close. If it's bandits, they'll have guards."

Lefty loped off into the dark. Sam went back and sat down by the fire. Begert said, with a suspicious glint in his pale eyes, "Where's Lefty?"

"He's watching the herd for a while. Horses mighty restless tonight."

Begert relaxed a little, but his eyes were still sharp. "It's a long drive without water," he said.

Lefty came in at midnight and poured a tin cup of coffee from the pot hanging on a branch over the fire. "They'll be all right," he said, "providing we don't get a thunderstorm." He looked off toward the west. "Thought I saw lightning in the clouds this evening, but I guess it's gone."

Begert seemed satisfied. He said, watching them, "We better turn in."

Sam yawned. "I'm tired," he said.

Lefty swung two antelope hams over

the fire for morning, and they went to bed.

They were up at daylight, and the horses were on the move a half hour later. Lefty had dished out sandwiches with thick slabs of hot antelope meat, and black coffee. How the stringy cowhand had stood the last few days, riding all day and cooking all night, was something he alone knew.

They stopped at eleven o'clock for lunch. The caballado spread out and grazed on the sparse grass. Sam was jumpy. He felt better an hour later when they were on the move.

It was after four o'clock when Lefty, riding between Sam and Begert, leaned back in his saddle and said, "I know this country. Over that hill up yonder at the top of the long slope, you can see the Rio Grande."

Sam's apprehension vanished. He felt good toward everybody—even Begert. He looked at Begert, smiling broadly. But the look on Begert's face stiffened him. Begert was standing in his stirrups and looking toward the west and a little to the rear. There was no doubt of it! Begert was relieved. Relieved and pleased.

Lefty spurred his horse past Begert's. Sam looked behind. Henderson, Gentry, and Rusty Jones were riding stirrup-to-stirrup behind him. Their eyes were on him.

Sam looked to the southwest. A great column of dust was in the air. Sam's eyes narrowed and he said, "That's bandits!" He looked back at Begert.

Begert's big whiskered face turned slowly toward him. Begert's pale eyes glittered. "Yeah, it's bandits," he said harshly.

Sam said decisively, "We're almost to the border. We can make it. They won't attack us at the Rio Grande in sight of El Paso." He spurred forward.

But Begert's big arm grabbed the horse's bridle. The horse wheeled, but Begert held his head. Begert's back was to the herd. Sam was in the open for Begert's three gun-hands.

Sam said, "Turn my horse loose."

Begert said, "That's Zopilote coming yonder, with five hundred men. He'll take over the herd and drive them out to Arizona."

Sam began to tauten. "What about me?"

"Nothing about you," said Begert. "You'll be dead."

Sam said accusingly, "You made a deal with Zopilote."

Begert said, "Me and Zopilote always work together."

Sam's eyes widened, "Are you Red Galloway?"

A wolfish grin spread over Begert's sandy-whiskered face. "I'm Red Galloway," he said. "And you got two thousand dollars in your belt."

HE ACTED as if he expected Sam Nordin to start shaking, but Sam looked at him and knots formed in the corners of his jaws. Then Sam said, "What are you doing on this trip?"

"Me and my boys took that money from the express company in Sierra Blanca the night before I saw you. Things were getting too hot because we killed a U. S. mail guard, and I figured we'd better hide out for a while. This was a good way."

Sam looked toward the left. The dust cloud out on the desert was growing larger, and now Sam could distinguish black dots ahead of the cloud and knew they were riders and coming fast. He knew too, that beyond any doubt Begert intended to kill him. Begert *had* to kill him.

Sam said quietly, watching Begert's eyes, "There's still time to save the herd."

"There ain't no need," said Begert. "I can have half the herd and not pay these Mexicans or anybody else."

Sam was astounded. "You'd cheat the Mexicans out of their pay?" he asked.

A hard glitter came into Begert's eyes. He said with a great swelling of his neck. "You figger you're too good for me, Sam Nordin." He swung his leg over the cantle to dismount. "You never trusted me since we left the border." He recited it as a wrong, standing in the stirrup so his eyes were level with Sam's. Sam was taut. All the enmity that had been smouldering between them was about to boil over.

"You offered me your half of the herd for the stallion because you didn't have

guts enough to watch me whip him," Begert said, and in his voice was all the bitterness of an arrogant man caught doing the thing he knows is wrong but which he cannot help. He was preparing to take out his shame and his resentment on the man who had caught him in the act. "Get down off your horse," said Begert. "We'll see who's too good for who."

He swung down. Sam was on the ground at the same time. Sam faced him, watching. Sam said, "You did me one good turn, Begert. You gave me safe passage through outlaw country."

Begert, circling, said furiously: "I'm going to give you something else now—a border whipping."

A chill went over Sam. A border whipping meant anything—and the winner would wind up by using a blacksnake whip. A man often came out crippled for life.

But for Sam there was a consolation. He wouldn't come out crippled. Unless something unexpected happened, he'd come out dead no matter who won.

He launched himself forward to meet Begert. Their bodies met with a heavy thud. Begert was heavier, but Sam hit harder. They rebounded. Then Begert closed.

Sam was underneath when they went down. Begert's boots were raking his legs. Begert had hold of both of Sam's ears and was trying to tear them off. Sam put his hand, with the fingers spread, on Begert's whiskered face and pushed it upward. His middle finger found an eye. Begert roared and jerked back.

Sam saw Lefty Davis standing behind Begert with widespread legs and thumbs hooked in his gun-belt, watching.

Sam was on his feet, slugging. He hit Begert in the face, but Begert absorbed the blows. His pale blue eyes were blood-shot. His lips were back to bare his yellowed teeth. He ran at Sam with his head down. He caught Sam in the stomach and knocked him flat. Then he was slugging him on the temples with heavy fists.

Sam was dizzy, but he got his legs up. He kicked Begert and rolled away. He was facing the rear now. Two Mexicans had come up from the drag position and

were watching with wary eyes. Sam got to his feet and stood for a second, swaying. Begert hit him in the stomach, a crashing blow that laid him flat on his back.

Things swirled before Sam's eyes. He tried to lift his head but could see nothing but the legs of mustangs going past behind Begert. He tried to raise himself, but the blow had been in the solar plexus and he was momentarily paralyzed.

Begert's eyes blazed in triumph. His bloody face was distorted. He said hoarsely, "I'm going to stomp your brains out," and started forward. From his throat came that strange animal cry that he had made when he was whipping the stallion.

Sam tried desperately to get up but it was useless. He could not get his legs under him. Begert left the ground in a leap that would put his boots in Sam's face. Sam twisted his head as far to one side as he could.

But he saw a towering form behind Begert. A black-and-white horse with a bloody hooi-print on its chest and a gunnysack hanging in shreds from its neck. It reared on great hind legs. Its front feet were closely hobbled with a rawhide strap, but it lifted them over Begert and brought them crashing down on his head. Begert's skull split like a ripe melon.

Sam, impelled by this new danger—for the horse was trampling Begert—got his gun in his hand. He started to shoot the horse but he heard a shot from Lefty Davis. Gents Gentry cursed; the sound became a gurgel and he fell.

SAM rolled to his side and drew his gun. Henderson and Jones were firing at Lefty. Lefty was on his knees, crouched, offering as small a target as possible. He put a slug between Hoddy Henderson's eyes. Sam got Rusty Jones with three in the wishbone.

Lefty ran up. He plunked his smoking pistol in his holster and helped Sam to his feet. Sam looked at the four bodies on the ground and said gratefully, "I feel better."

He looked for the stallion. It was going along with the herd, its head high once more. Sam got hold of his saddle

and up. Lefty was beside him. Lefty's arm was hanging limp.

Sam looked to the southwest. The dust cloud was less than half a mile away. He could distinguish horses and men. They were coming at a dead run. Perhaps Zopilote'd thought the shots were a signal.

Sam turned to the herd and shouted, "Whip 'em up! It's Zopilote!"

For an instant the whole world seemed to freeze with inaction. Then the cry was picked up and relayed. "Zopilote! Zopilote!" The Mexican riders had panic in their voices. They spurred their own horses into a frantic run. Manuel passed Sam and Lefty, heading for the front. Manuel's big straw hat was blown back and the brim stood straight up. His eyes were enormously white in his brown face. "Zopilote!" he shrieked horsely. "*Vámonos todos!*"

Sam fired the three shots remaining in his pistol and rode alongside the herd, yelling the old cowhand's salute, "*E-yip-pee! Yippy, yippy, yippy!*"

The tired mustangs picked up the fright. They felt the hysteria in the Mexicans' yells as the Mexicans left the herd and cut for the border. They picked the frantic urging in Sam's and Lefty's voices and reacted to the pounding of hoofs on the hard sand. They broke into a gallop. They topped the rise and smelled water—the water of the Rio Grande. They went into a dead run.

The Mexican driving the chuckwagon far ahead heard the shouting and the shots. He looked back and saw the attacking column. Zopilote's men now were firing at them. The driver left the chuckwagon in a flying leap on the side opposite Zopilote's attack. He started to run across the desert. Then he looked and saw the fifteen hundred mustangs of the caballado bearing down on him. He ploughed to a stop and reversed. He made a flying run and caught the chuckwagon. He climbed into the seat and slashed the mules with his whip. "*Andales! Andales!*" he screamed.

Sam could hear him half a mile back, through the rumble of pounding hoofs and the water-maddened neighs of the mustangs. Then through the dust he saw a painful sight. The big stallion was

lurching along in the rear. He was trying to keep up but was losing.

Sam wheeled back. He skidded his horse to a stop. He was down and under the stallion's head, with an open knife in his hand. Bullets spurted sand over him, but he slashed the rawhide hobble. It was only then that he realized what position he was in. But the stallion didn't rear. Sam stepped out from under. The stallion stood, trembling. Sam slapped the big horse on the flank, and the stallion was off with mane streaming back in the wind. Sam followed him. They caught up with the herd. By that time most of the mustangs were in the water.

Lefty rode up beside Sam and said, "Load your gun, Sam. We've still got Zopilote to deal with."

Sam slipped bullets into the chamber. He was watching Zopilote's column. The leaders had stopped at the top of the hill two miles away.

"I don't think they will attack us here," Sam said. "For one thing, they don't know whether these Mexicans will fight for us—and for another thing, we're in sight of the United States Army. I reckon Zopilote didn't hit us quite as soon as Begert figured."

Lefty said happily, "I swear that United States flag gives a man a mighty comfortable feeling."

They stayed back, keeping watch while the mustangs drank. Then they turned their horses to the river. The big black-and-white stallion was waiting, his proud neck arched. When they turned, he wheeled and trotted toward the water ahead of them.

Sam had a very good feeling. With Begert dead, he was the owner of fifteen hundred horses.

He said, "We'll round up these Mexicans and pay 'em off. I can sell a few broncs in El Paso to get some money, and pick up a new crew."

Sam wrapped Lefty's arm with a strip torn from his shirt-tail, split the end of the cloth and tied it.

Then he told Lefty, "You'll be all right. The bullet went through."

Lefty shrugged carelessly and his horse moved on.

Sam said, "You're a good man to ride the river with, Lefty. How'd you like to go with me to Wyoming?"

Lefty looked back. "I'm a son-of-a-gun if you ain't the most one-track-minded cowman I ever saw. You never take time out to feel bad or scared or feel relieved or nothin'. The only word you know is 'Cheyenne'."

He grinned cheerfully. "Wish I had a gal like that waiting for me. When do we start?"

THE END



Some guys keep punching to the last bell—others never hear it. It took a washed-up champ who didn't know how to quit to prove that—

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Record Wrangling

By ARIZONA BLAKE

HOWDY, tophands. Here we are with some new platters for you to train your ears on—and some mighty exciting news about three top Western tunes that have really taken hold. Their names are CANDY KISSES, CARELESS HANDS and the up-and-coming TENNESSEE BORDER. There are lots of different versions of these great new songs, with many of your favorite artists hustling down to the record-makin' shack to put their brand on these musical hits. A little later on I'm going to tell you some more about them, but right now this record reviewer wants you to bend your ears in the direction of a right-frolicsome windy I lately heard about.

Any of you readers getting fed up with the contests that have been spawning from here to there? These endless contests for this and that fiddle-faddle foolishness have been my own private peeve, too—and now along comes Alan Cummings. He's the all-night conductor of the Washington station WWDC, and just recently he launched a campaign on his "Dawn Patrol." I figure he just about had his fill of contests, also. Only he got het up about it. This is the contest Cummings has started:

Complete the sentence, "I hate contests because—"

There's a grand prize for the winner—a box top!

Remember when some of you cowboys were overseas and honing for some real signs of home? Well, as we all know, there still are plenty of our American boys stationed in army posts in Europe and Asia, and now they're going to be seeing

live all-Western shows. That's right. Redd Harper, who's the director and producer of Armed Forces Radio shows in Hollywood, says he's gotten word from the army brass. That means that some of your favorite Western stars will be touring American bases overseas for the first time, brightening the lives of our boys who are away from home.

Before I go any further, I'm going to let a music-lovin' younker from the tall corn state of Ioway corral some space. He writes:

"My hobby is singing and yodeling cowboy songs . . . and Ernest Tubb is one of my special favorites. Please print only my initials. B.W."

Okay, pard, we've done gratified your request—and there's a new Ernest Tubb record reviewed below.

Remember, tophands, we're of a mind to be as polite as a bartender to a U. S. marshal to all you other readers. Just keep your letters and postcards coming, folks. We desk-herders like to hear from you all. Whether you're out on the great open plains, on ranches, or stuck in the crowded spaces, we put a heap of importance in your letters.

That's why we like to keep reminding you to write in and let us know what you think of this-here *Record Wrangling* column, and how we can improve it. We'll rig it up any way you cowpokes see fit.



TENNESSEE BORDER
CANDY KISSES
by Red Foley (Decca)

Here's a coupling of two of the top tunes, and it's sixth on the popularity polls. You'll recall that I predicted that George Morgan's version of **CANDY KISSES**—which he wrote, incidentally—would hit the big time. Well, it sure enough did! Now there are lots of other musical cowboys coming along with their version of this delightful folk torcher. Red Foley's aiming to slide right into the best-seller lists with his persuasive and sincere rendition of this plaintive ditty.

Topside of this musical gold mine is **TENNESSEE BORDER**, a mountain ballad about a young Tennessee Lochinvar who found a pretty gal who was her mother's only daughter on the **TENNESSEE BORDER**. Despite all parental protest, the singer wooed and married the belle of the border country. Foley gives this hillbilly success some right powerful warbling. A really good touch is the swinging organ.



TENNESSEE BORDER
I WATCHED YOU WALK AWAY
 by Carl Story and The Rambling
 Mountaineers (Mercury)

Here's a breezy rendition, with a snappy instrumental combo in the background, of the up-and-comin' mountain ditty. You'll probably want this waxing for Story's lusty warbling, although nothing much happens on the back, where he ruefully says to his former sweetheart, "I stood and **WATCHED YOU WALK AWAY** from me."



TENNESSEE BORDER
I GOT THE MILK 'EM IN THE
MORNING BLUES
 by Tennessee Ernie (Capitol)

The **BORDER** tune gets a virile interpretation here by Tennessee Ernie, who's a new songster in the Capitol folk stable. On the other side of this waxing, Ernie's muscular manner will give you rural fans some likable, earthy country blues.

CARELESS HANDS
SPEAK AGAIN, SWEET LIPS
 by Shorty Long and The Santa Fe
 Rangers (RCA Victor)

Shorty Long's fine caroling of this new hit should make plenty of friends for him. With plenty of emotion, he sings, "Some-day you'll know the sorrow of **CARELESS HANDS** that let love slip through their fingers." That's a warning to all you cow bunnies to be faithful, to always remember that someone's trusting you. There's a fine chorus of rustic fiddling by Shorty himself, and then some more appealing vocalizing to make that old needle sizzle in the wax, as it whirls on this plaintive hoedown.

Flip the platter, and you get Shorty telling the sorrowful tale of a futile plea to a departed sweetheart to **SPEAK AGAIN, SWEET LIPS**. But though they never can, Shorty pledges to always be true, in a way that brings tears.



CARELESS HANDS
PANHANDLE RAG
 by Leon McAuliffe and His Western
 Swing Band (Columbia)

I'm mentioning this version because you might like Jimmy Hall's straightforward vocalizing in a dreamy tempo about the cowboy who left his loving heart in **CARELESS HANDS**.

For a rhythmic dance instrumental, the flipover will do nicely. It's a Western jazz piece, with composer Leon helping along the tempo with his steel guitar. McAuliffe and his band, performing regularly on radio station KVOO, in Tulsa, Okla., were recently made members en masse of the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce.



SUNDOWN IN MY HEART
OUR ANNIVERSARY
 by Texas Jim Robertson and
 The Panhandle Punchers (RCA Victor)

The way-down-under bass of resonant Texas Jim Robertson makes this simple

Western ballad real pleasing. I guess I go every time for those rich, mellow tones of Texas Jim. They're just terrific. And when he glides them caressingly through a tender little tale of a love that has passed away, leaving **SUNDOWN IN MY HEART**, well—I'm just a gone goose.

The other side of this recording has Tex singing with sincerity of an even more tearful event, for he is here alone on the day that should have been **OUR ANNIVERSARY**. There's a bucketful of simple sentiment here, and Tex's melancholy tonsiling puts the melody on the "must" list for everybody who likes his tunes pathos-laden.



MONEY, MARBLES AND CHALK I'LL NEVER, NEVER LEAVE YOU AGAIN

by "Pop" Eckler (King)

Pop Eckler wrote this tune that's starting to climb the hit ladder, and here he sings it in a touching and authentic style. Lamenting the ugly twist of fate that took away his loved one and left him with nothing but **MONEY, MARBLES AND CHALK**, Pop carols this song right into your heart.

On the coupling, Pop delivers another vocal in a heart-grIPPING manner, as he sings an unhappy vocal that's loaded with deep feeling.



TAKE AN OLD COLD 'TATER PENNIES FOR PAPA

by Jimmie Dickens (Columbia)

Seems as if most of the tunes this session are real sentimentalizers. Guess that's the way life really is most of the time. Still, it's down-right refreshing to change the pace once in a while. We don't have to call the serious side of life hog-wash in order to appreciate some fine country humor—and that's what Jimmie Dickens is serving up on the topside of this disk.

The colorful warbler always is finding himself low man on the totem pole in this

whimsical ditty about the jasper who was always told to **TAKE AN OLD COLD 'TATER** and wait—when there was company for dinner and his mother wasn't sure there was enough fried chicken to go around. "Little" Jimmie—he's all of four feet eleven inches!—sings this wryly humorous piece in easy-to-take fashion, just making you *want* to take it.

When you flip the waxing, you get a piteous tale that goes right to the harrowing things of life, as Jimmie sings with strong feeling about a little girl who has to beg for her blind father and little brother.

Roy Acuff's band accompanies both sides in rugged fashion. Did you know that Roy is going to co-star with John Wayne in a Republic picture? It'll be called "Eagles in Exile," I'm told—and there'll be a couple of more screenings of Roy in some Columbia pictures.

And while we're on the subject of recording cowboys hitting the movies—here's a movie star who's abandoning the flickers for a short time to make some records. It's Gabby Hayes, pardners. I'll let you know about Gabby's record releases just as soon as they're made and put on the market.



WALTZ OF THE ALAMO THE COLOR SONG

by Pee Wee King and his Golden West Cowboys (RCA Victor)

Remember Pee Wee King's "Tennessee Waltz"? He's been ridin' high, wide and handsome with it for a long time—and now he's come along with another waltz which may win him similar laurels. It's really jogging along with a happy-on-the-plains lilt, this three-quarter-time opus with the just-right tempo and the full-bodied fiddling. The catchy theme is based on "Taps," and Redd Stewart warbles it with a Southwest flavor and infectious ease.

On the reverse side, there's some more fine Stewart melodious vocalizing. The lyrics are the kind that will appeal to most range trotters. Life lost its color when I lost my love is **THE COLOR SONG'S** wail.

RECORD WRANGLING



DADDY, WHEN IS MOMMY COMING HOME TILL THE END OF THE WORLD by Ernest Tubb (Decca)

Here's the Ernest Tubb release I promised B.W. I'd mention. It's a neat coupling, and though it won't set the sagebrush on fire, it sure will warm a lot of hearts. On the topside, Ernest Tubb grows the tune, **WHEN IS MOMMY COMING HOME**, to the top of the sentimental sweepstakes. Still in a serious vein, the other side of the platter has Ernest Tubb pledging his love to his petticoat honey, **TILL THE END OF THE WORLD**. The bounce tempo makes this simple, old-fashioned declaration move in a sprightly fashion.

As a rich contrast, there's another recording you Ernest Tubb fans will want to get. The gruff-voiced hillbilly ace teamed up with the Andrew Sisters to sing the hit tune: **DON'T ROB ANOTHER MAN'S CASTLE**. Flip that disk, and you have the Andrew gals helping Ernie do a snappy job with the catchy, homespun tale: **I'M BITING MY FINGERNAILS AND THINKING OF YOU**.

BEATS all how the time flies before I've half told you all I'd a mind to. Well, I've got to learn to face facts, as my paw always told me after I'd backed into the mule. That's the musical cavvy, pards—except for a reminder that it's you folks who're really ramrodding this outfit. The best way for you to take hold of the job is by letting me know plumb pronto which Western songsters you're especially interested in.

Next month we'll come rambling around again with another *Record Wrangling* column and more hitching-post gossip. Don't forget that we will print your letters if you wish, or answer them personally. Send your letters to:

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Adios for now, pardners.

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Dr. Scholl's SOLVEX

(Continued from page 40)

"Brick!" she gasped, then sagged back weakly against the ropes. "Oh, Brick, I was never so glad to see anybody in my life!"

"Huh?" Brick stared at her foolishly, momentarily forgetting the knife in his hand with which he was going to cut the ropes.

"Who—who was that man?" the girl went on.

A flood of relief poured through Brick, turning him weak. He hadn't realized until now how much it meant to have this girl believe he was square. Not trusting himself to speak, he cut the ropes holding her and lifted her to her feet while she clung to him as if she would never let him go.

Finally he said, "So you didn't think it was me, huh?"

"I did at first, but then—I wondered who would want me to think you'd do a thing like that. Was it Bechtol?"

"Yeah, it was Bechtol." Presently he would have to tell her what had happened but not just yet.

"I acted like a fool this afternoon, didn't I?"

Brick strove to keep his voice cool and level while his heart thundered like a full grown stampede. "How did you know it wasn't me?"

She laughed then, a nervous little sound that tingled through Brick like a hot drink.

"Brick, I'm a cowpuncher—at last! You know what you said about reading sign? Well, when that man lifted me off the horse out here, I had hold of his right hand and there was nothing wrong with it. I remembered that your knuckles were swinned and rough from that fight." She hesitated, gazing up at him with an apologetic little smile. "I think it's time we got acquainted—really acquainted. Boots is my name, pardner."

She extended her hand and Brick met it quickly.

"Glad to know you, Boots," he drawled with a wide grin. "By golly, Hackamore shore had it right. Anything can happen when you're workin' for a woman. Anything!"

LAWDOG WITHOUT HORNS

(Continued from page 66)

"You better go home to the missus and wash and dress up all over again, because maybe you still got time—"

Buck was already leaving. He had to weather the storm, of course, that Eva created, something about Buck having no business getting himself all shot up. Finally her fuming gave way to patience, as she made a last-minute change in his oldest tie and put her resigned approval on his rumpled, second-best suit. In all her hand-sewed finery, she waited while Buck pulled up in front of the house.

He got down, gingerly because of his shoulder, showing rare gallantry by sweeping off his dusty hat and making a low bow.

"Madame your carriage awaits."

Eva laughed in spite of herself, apparently touched a little by this new Buck. "Buck Murphy," she demanded, "what brand have you been drinking? You haven't been like this in twenty years."

Buck gave her a roguish wink as he removed his cigar and exhaled a streamer of smoke. "Gettin' younger every day, Ma. Well, don't stand there starin'. This is our big night, you know."

"Not to mention Jennie's," she reminded. He helped her into the buggy and they were on their way. "It's good to see you this way, Buck. And high time, if you ask me, that you did retire."

"So I figured, Eva, so I figured."

A silence, which to Buck was like soft music, was presently between them, as the school-house loomed ahead, all lit up and filled with people.

And so it was that he got there, a little late and attracting some attention, but it didn't matter. His clothes weren't in too good condition, but nobody cared about that, either. Neither did his collar gone awry and his tie slipping out of place matter too much.

What really counted was that he was there, and that he'd vowed never to back down on his family again. Buck Murphy, with his wife Eva beside him. Buck, who was all eyes and ears and pumping Irish pride. For that, Mister, was his Jennie Lee sitting up there on the stage, looking so prim and properly scared. . . .



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(Continued from page 69)

lowed behind them with his cavvy, came in and shooed the work-horses into his bunch of grazing saddle-stock.

"Gotta make another damn' camp," the cook would grumble.

The nighthawk would drag his bed-roll into the shade—if there were any shade—and go to sleep. In a few hours, he would be taking the remuda out to guard it over night.

The wagon's end-gate would go down, making the cook's work-bench. He'd dig a fire-pit, put his racks in place, and start his fire. Pots and pans and other utensils would come out of the mess-wagon and start to work.

By this time the wrangler had his remuda quiet and on grass and he might ride in and help the cook. He'd take an axe and go into the willows and cotton-woods and box elders and pick out some dry wood. He'd cut this down, tie his lasso-rope around it, and drag the load of wood into camp.

"Injuns done cleaned up most of the dry-wood, cook. Saw traces where they'd camped here this spring."

"Dang them redskins."

"We'll get by." The jingler coiled his riata. "Anythin' else I can do to alleviate your misery?"

The cookie looked at him.

"Yeah, you kin git outa my sight."

"You make nice company, fella," the jingler said.

"I got work to do."

His chores completed, the wrangler rode back to his cavvy. The cook kept on working; his day was always harder when he had to move camp. Dough to set and knead, coffee to put on to boil, steaks to cut, spuds to boil. A roundup crew never ate all at one time. Therefore the cook had to have a meal ready at all hours of the day and night. It made his job a hundred percent tougher.

"I sure earn that ninety bucks," the cook grumbled. He measured some Arbuckle coffee and dumped it into the boiling water. Soon his crew would be drifting in. And a cowpoke was always hungry.

He put his hand to his mouth and let out his loudest bellow:

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